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From the Delivered to the Dispatched:
Masculinity in Modern American Fiction
(1969-1977)

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PhD English Literature
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Declaration:

This is to certify that the work contained within this thesis has been composed by me and is entirely my own work. Any secondary criticism used has been properly referenced throughout. No part of this thesis has been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

Signed:

Harriet P. Stilley

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Thesis Abstract

There has long been a critical consensus that the presiding mood of America in the late sixties and early seventies was one of pervasive social upheaval, with perpetual ‘crisis’ seeming in many ways the narrative rule. Contemporaneous critics such as Erich Fromm, David Riesman, and William Whyte, together with late-twentieth century writers, Michael Kimmel, Sally Robinson, and David Savran, congruently agree that the post-war American epoch connoted one of expeditious adjustment for white, middle-class men in particular. The specific aim of this thesis is, thus, to elucidate the ways in which the literary fiction of this period by authors John Cheever, James Dickey, Toni Morrison, Cormac McCarthy, and new journalist, Michael Herr, reflects a significantly increased concern for such alterations in the values and attitudes of contemporary cultural life through representations of modern American masculinities. Multiple liberation struggles, including Civil Rights, Feminism, and sexual politics, converged with core economic shifts that transformed the US from an industrial based to a consumerist model. For hegemonic masculinity, this is a transferal from ‘masculine’ industrial labour and the physically expressive body to ‘feminine’ consumerism. This study will first of all underline the extent to which fiction in this period registers those changes through the lens of a fraying of what was once a fortified fabric from which white, patriarchal power was normatively fashioned. What is most disrupted by the paradigm shifts of the era will appear, then, to be a monolithic, coherently bounded American masculinity. However, by way of an interrelated interpretation of contemporaneous feminist and Marxist theory, my research will subsequently show that, rather than being negated, the fabric of that dominant masculinity regenerated and reasserted itself, primarily through the fraught revival of a violent and mythologized hypermasculinity in mainstream US culture. Whether it is through the suburban maladjustment of Eliot Nailles and Paul Hammer, the fraudulent frontier ethic of Ed Gentry and Lewis Medlock, or the more perverse pugnacity of Lester Ballard and internalised racism of Cholly Breedlove, this thesis argues that, by the mid-seventies, numerous American novelists had sought to artistically magnify the ways in which fundamental changes in the patterns of national life were occurring – changes which are represented more often than not as damaging to the normative model of masculinity and the experiential consciousness of men.

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Introduction

“The old is dying and the new cannot be born.

In this interregnum the most varied of morbid phenomena appear.”

Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks* (1971 33)

“It was: it was not, the beginning of the end – some end” (28). This is the prefatory phrase with which Tommy Wilhelm, the indigent and impotent ‘fall guy’ of Saul Bellow’s 1956 novel, *Seize the Day*, discloses a contemporaneous psychological angst that would inevitably characterise the predicament of post-war American masculinity. Indeed, amidst the various social, economic, political, and demographic changes that had been accelerated by the Second World War and continued to alter the American landscape through the fifties and sixties, apprehension over what may or may not be at “some end,” or rather, “whose end” was, in 1956, arguably beginning, reflects the transition from a manufacture-based economy to a late capitalist information-based market. This economic transmutation, from industrial production to service assistance, typified the waning of traditional sources of masculine identity rooted in physical labour and free enterprise, together with a waxing in the disparately more middle-class, white-collar, consumerist, and symbolically ‘feminine’ values of corporate capitalism. Driven by this burgeoning bureaucratic, mass-market economy, wherein “everyone was *supposed* to have money” - that is, where “they’d be ashamed not to have it” – consumerism became conjugated with social status, and hence the necessary motivational and material resource for an emerging managerial, service-based mode of masculinity (Bellow 30; emphasis added).

With “no sales” and “no income” (13), however, Tommy Wilhelm significantly has “no position” (4), and fears he may, as such, “never more be a man” (97). Through explicitly equating Wilhelm’s manhood with that of his (lack of) commercial remuneration, Bellow in effect foregrounds the period as one of socio-economic maladjustment, in which “former expectations” or accepted normative assumptions of masculinity based on corporal agency and creative individuality, were “feverishly” and “fruitlessly” in flux (30, 57). Forsaken in a paradoxical “state of arrest” whereby Wilhelm “didn’t seem to know what he should do

next,” Bellow furthermore accentuates a submissive dependency and psychic stagnation of the individual as the emasculating fare of the modern American male’s interrelated obligatory economic and social imperatives (42). The fact Wilhelm “could not keep this up much longer,” declaring that, “today he was afraid” - that, *today*, “his routine was about to break up” and a “huge trouble long presaged but till now formless was due” (4) – consequently exemplifies the manner in which fundamental concerns regarding a “deep crisis” or “despair” in masculinity were, by the mid-fifties, beginning to take a palpably psychological shape, and specifically encode the contemporary novelist’s literary understanding of the individual and social implications posed by a modern US culture of abundance (39).

From Bellow’s fiction to that of similarly popular post-war authors such as Norman Mailer, Philip Roth and John Updike, it becomes increasingly apparent that American fiction since the 1950s has been purposefully preoccupied with the male self and this acute sense of its intensifying instability. Disparaged by David Foster Wallace as the solipsistic, self-obsessed “great male narcissists” (57), the central premise of these said authors’ works is, of course, a dramatic conflict – or what Karen Ashcraft and Lisa A. Flores term “civilised-primitive dualism” (5) - between the conventional, competitive rhetoric of frontier individualism and the authenticity with which this rugged nationalist discourse is historically valorised, on the one hand; and a qualitatively different kind of standardised, sanitised social conformism that appears to be the pathological by-product of a mass-produced homogenous culture and the impersonal ideology of organisational capitalism, on the other. Alongside the credence that America’s foundational experience of the frontier itself is productive of defining and enacting ‘authentic’ national character, is the mutually reinforcing contention that those principal, physical attributes of the frontiersman – that which historian Frederick Jackson Turner surmised as a “coarseness and strength,” combined with a “masterful grasp of material things [...] to effect great ends” (57) - are the natural and instinctive manifestation of manhood and its inherent patriarchal authority. The “survivalist ideals” of the Western frontier plane, in other words, engender values essential to the composition of

hegemonic American masculinity predicated on a pioneering spirit of self-reliance, sovereignty, and state democracy; if not white supremacy, subjugation, and savage violence (Turner 71). Insofar as there is an escalating disparity between this rhetorical masculinist conviction and the cultural avenues available for white, middle-class men to latterly realise such an ideal in the “ever retreating frontier” world of mid-twentieth-century corporate America, a personal narrative of male decline thus inevitably transpires (Turner 37).

Before further considering the specifically contemporary connotations of this masculine “misery” or “trouble” (Bellow 45), it is important to realise that fears over a supposed ‘loss’ of machismo with a symbolic “closing of the Frontier” (Turner 28) were “not exactly new,” nor was their literary representation completely novel (Bellow 45). In *Manliness and Civilisation*, Gail Bederman argues that from as early as “the last decades of the nineteenth-century,” a myriad of American writers, social commentators, and politicians had become “unusually interested in – even obsessed with – manhood” (10). Certainly, with the drop in small-scale entrepreneurship and the rise in low-level clerical employment transforming the nature of work, and as the arrival of a newly consumerist cultural ethos of pleasure encouraged many middle-class men to find identity in leisure instead of labour, “older codes of manliness” encapsulated through “strong character and a powerful will,” and which remained so integral to nineteenth-century views of “men’s identities, men’s bodies, and men’s access to power,” were being challenged in a variety of social and economic ways that markedly echo those resurfacing in the 1950s (Bederman 12-13). Set in motion by these structural changes in social organisation, especially the administration of work, the modest, but nevertheless growing advancement of women and women’s suffrage at the turn of the century concurrently compounded a deep undulation of dread, as male critics denounced female admission to the formerly all-male public sphere as a sexual discord to “destroy national life,” while the “displacing [of] manhood by womanhood” at the hands of these reforming women was furthermore seen to be an agitating and unqualified “rebellion against

nature.”¹ For K.A. Cuordileone, this fear over a breakdown of normative sexual boundaries was “uniquely powerful,” inasmuch as it could be “much more readily personalised in a way that anxieties about materialism could not” (xix). It is no surprise, then, the extent to which women, beginning in the late nineteenth century, were literally and literarily rebuked as the obvious “oppositional archetype against which a healthy autonomous male self could be measured,” that is to say, as the physical “purveyor of feminising values and forces that emasculated the culture or crushed the male ego” (Cuordileone 101).

In his 1886 novel, *The Bostonians*, New York-born author Henry James notably tethers the societal destabilisation of gender hierarchies inextricably together with this growing sense of a malleable male self. It is through the character of Basil Ransom - an evocatively named political conservative from Mississippi who finds himself recoiling in the company of feminist activists in Boston - that James inveighs an encroaching female influence in expressly informative terms. As Ransom explains:

The whole generation is womanised: the masculine tone is passing out of the world; it's feminine, a nervous, hysterical, chattering, canting age, an age of hollow phrases and false delicacy and exaggerated solitudes, and coddled sensibilities, which, if we don't look out soon, will usher in the reign of mediocrity, of the feeblest and flattest and the most pretentious that has ever been. The masculine character, the ability to dare and endure, to know and yet not fear reality, to look the world in the face and take it for what it is – a very queer and partly very base mixture – that is what I want to preserve, or rather, as I may say, to recover; and I must tell you that I don't in the least care what becomes of you ladies while I make the attempt! (283).

Apprehensive about how “their history and culture were positioning them as men” (Bederman 16), this comprehensive castigation about the symbolic feminisation of the ‘masculine’ individual by ‘effeminate’ social forces underscores the extent to which any alleged achievement of masculine actuality, namely, that “ability to dare and endure,” remains consistently dependent on a displaced abjection, socially shaped in opposition to the

¹ Cited by Bederman; [Gaius Glenn Atkins], “The Right and Wrong of Feminism: A Sermon Preached

feminine and those excessively overcivilised, ‘unmasculine’ characteristics that threaten to debunk the “very base mixture” upholding America’s national paradigm of imperial hegemony (James 283). Such a virile verbalisation in turn accounts for the ways in which American men – facing the corrosion of the separate spheres doctrine and the closure of the western frontier – responded to their fin-de-siècle moment by reasserting patriarchal prerogatives; recruiting a variety of muscular guises and defensive forms of violence as a means to reactively counter the mollifying ‘mediocrity,’ or else ‘womanised’ weaknesses of the age.

Indeed, as “large-scale structural shifts affected microstructural relations,” most markedly between that of the sexes, Michael Kimmel notes how many men sought to “combat” the purported “feminisation of American manhood” by way of reinstating purposely homosocial provinces for the “vigorous assertion of a renewed masculinity” (1987 262). This hardy masculinist mission, needless to say, reached its figurative apotheosis in the moral and political philosophies of President Theodore Roosevelt. Adorned with his “sombbrero, silk neckerchief, fringed buckskin shirt, sealskin chaparajos [...] and alligator hide boots,”² Roosevelt was, by his own self-constructed admission, “a booster of the western cure,” proclaiming that he owed “more than [he] could ever express to the west” (Kimmel, 1996 120-1).³ In two sermons, “The Strenuous Life” (1899) and “The Pioneer Spirit and American Problems” (1900), Roosevelt directly deplored the “emasculated milk-and-water moralities” of the modern moneyed “lazy man,” and trumpeted the call to reawaken those “great fighting masterful virtues” epitomised through the “strenuous life” of the frontiersman.⁴ As the allegorical embodiment of masculine tradition and heroism, the wilderness hunter adventurer thus prospered as the mythological model for Roosevelt’s “remedial training in barbarism, violence, and appropriation” (*An Autobiography* 76). From

² Cited in Donald Day, ed. *The Hunting and Exploring Adventures of Theodore Roosevelt* (New York: Dial, 1955), pp. 47.

³ Prescribed by the neurologist S. Weir Mitchell as the “surest remedy for the ills of civilized life,” the “Western” or “West cure” involved “some form of return to barbarism,” a journey that required not only living “the out-door life of the camp,” but also imitating “the guides, woodmen and trappers [...] who live on the outposts of civilization” (*Nurse and Patient: and, Camp Cure*. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott. 1877: pp. 45).

⁴ Theodore Roosevelt. *The Works of Theodore Roosevelt*, Vol. 13, pp. 322-323.

his ‘bully pulpit,’ Roosevelt would earnestly lionise “rough sports” like rowing, riding, mountain climbing and shooting as the moralising and masculinising means to “develop [the] body, and, to a certain extent, [the] character,” and it was the creation of this “physical address,” or sporting economy of the west, which in effect offered an adolescent nation the initiation rites to a new, self-made manhood (“The American Boy” x-xi). For George Chauncey, at a time when other differences were “no longer so certain,” this increased focus on the “physical attributes of manliness” signifies an attempt to “root difference from women in the supposedly immutable differences of the body” (58-9). Literally armed with his “pearl-hilted revolver and beautifully finished Winchester rifle,” the American masculine self was, then, phallically primed with the notion that he was now “able to face anything” (Day 47), including a new century, and the US victories in WWI in many ways implied that the turn-of-the-century plight of manliness had been positively “resolved” – or, at least, “temporarily muted” (Kimmel, 1996 127).

Antedated by over half a century of effusions about the feminisation of American society, it hence becomes necessary to historicise and contextualise our reading of mid-twentieth-century masculinity in this way, so as to effectively demonstrate the extent to which the anxious assertion of a male crisis throughout postwar America was the rhetorical product of a much longer and, in truth, cyclical trend of emasculation crises and emboldened resolution policies. This cyclic, as opposed to linear interpretation of crisis, of course, posits masculinity as a “necessarily defensive, reactive identity formation,” one which, Sally Robinson argues, is “always looking to recoup its power,” and for men to incessantly “remasculinise themselves” in traditional, if not mythopoeically instructed ways (9). Having said this, however, Robinson pertinently points out that, “while new models of masculinity might share some features with old,” we cannot conflate cultural arbitrariness into the natural, nor can we assume history is comprised of a straightforward “struggle” between ‘traditional’ and ‘alternative,’ that is to say, ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ constructions of masculinity (10). To do so would be to legitimise a patriarchal-hierarchical paradigm of domination by means of immersing it in a biologic essentialism that is, itself, a naturalised

historical construction, thereby ultimately overlooking the modern “dynamism of shifts in gender meanings” (Robinson 10). As we turn to the discussion of American manhood in the 1950s and ‘60s, it is, therefore, important to appreciate how the social problems at issue for men in mid-century America – though in many ways familiar - were also qualitatively unique in complexion and circumstance from those of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century; which significantly suggests that they may not be so readily ‘resolved’ by “beefing up male physical and constitutional stamina” (Cuordileone 14).

For one thing, no longer were men simply shielding their manhood from the “exaggerated solitudes” and “coddled sensibilities” that Basil Ransom took umbrage with when he declared his generation woefully “womanised” (James 283). Whereas for figures like Ransom or Roosevelt, the cultivation of an “outward physical manliness” had been enough to bolster “national greatness and masculine regeneration” (Cuordileone 136); for mid-century males, the substantive social transformations instigated by the Civil Rights Movements and Women’s Liberation beginning in the late 1950s, and which mutually came to a head in the 1960s, meant that those previously self-evident assumptions about masculinity - specifically that transparently white, transhistorical “belief” that particular types of male bodies intrinsically and inviolably possessed “both a man’s identity and a man’s right to wield power” (Bederman 7) - were being directly called into question like never before. To this end, Robinson helpfully highlights the extent to which white male power had, up till now, “benefited enormously from keeping whiteness and masculinity in the dark” (1). With reference to Marxist-feminist Donna Haraway, Robinson explains that, through evading the “cultural marking that distances the subject from universalizing constructions of identity and narratives of experience,” the privilege of inhabiting an ‘unmarked body’ has been the sacrosanct patrimony and paternity of white Western man (Robinson 1). In Haraway’s own words, “from the eighteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries, the great historical constructions of gender, race, and class were embedded in the organically marked bodies of women [and] the colonised or enslaved” (210). Implicit in Haraway’s claim is this idea that to occupy a ‘marked body’ is to be ‘symbolically other,’ that is, the

external screen against which the “fictive rational self of universal [...] species man” has projected himself for generations as “a coherent subject” (210). To be ‘unmarked,’ on the other hand, is to be then ideologically “invisible” - i.e. implicitly and explicitly “hidden *by* history,” rather than “*from* it” - and “one cannot question, let alone dismantle, what remains hidden from view” (Robinson 1). That being said, when examined through the lens of Second Wave Feminism or Civil Rights activism, there begins to emerge an uncanny sense – which since the end of the Second World War, American men, including Bellow’s affronted male characters, “had used every means, and principally indifference and neglect, to avoid acknowledging,” despite “not [knowing] what it was” (*The Victim*, 1947 157) - that masculine identity is in fact a psychosomatic, social, and cultural construct, and hence paradoxically pliable, or else precariously prone to incur the anxiety and anomy that a modern mass society uniformly occasions.

Certainly, by the start of the ‘permissive sixties,’ the social and economic relations that customarily underpinned the patriarchal symbol system – a system to which male behaviour had potently always expected to aspire, if not essentially encompass – were, for better or worse, steadily eroding. In 1963, Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* openly addressed the national “problem that has no name,” namely, the domesticized and violent “isolation and alienation” of women – albeit, white middle-class women - and publically chastised the performative and manufactured hegemony of gender “roles” as that which forcefully kept both men and women alike “from knowing or being [themselves]” (386). In August of the same year, Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. delivered perhaps his most impassioned plea for generational as well as racial unity, asking his audience to dream with him of that “one day” when the “grandsons of slaves and the grandsons of slave owners” would “sit down together at the table of brotherhood.”⁵ Alongside the surge in neoliberal corporate commercialism and consumer capitalism, the sustained insistences for personal freedom and political democracy made by those who have historically been marginalised

⁵ Quoted by Kimmel in *Manhood in America* (1996), pp. 173. Luther King Jr. delivered his “I Have A Dream” speech during the ‘March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom’ on August 28, 1963.

were, thus, fraying the fabric of an “outmoded masculine mystique” - one that, as proven by Teddy Roosevelt, “made [men] feel unnecessarily inadequate when there were no bears to kill” (Friedan 386). Out of the remnants it became, as such, the concurrent task of men to rethread a new “meaning of masculinity” for a newly inclusive and material culture “all by themselves” (Kimmel, 1996 185). Yet with them now being more conscious of maleness not as absolute “fact,” but as a personal and political “problem,” Arthur Schlesinger observed “multiplying signs” that, in the wake of these powerful currents of change, something had gone “badly wrong” with the modern American male’s “conception of *himself*” (237; emphasis added).

One sign of a precipitating psychological despair can be seen, Schlesinger suggests, in contemporary novels, wherein the male protagonist, uncertain about whether he is still able to “fill the masculine role at all,” becomes ever more “preoccupied with proving his virility to himself” (237). The inadequacy of men’s efforts to hold fast to a mythic national ethos of manhood when confronted with the professional presence of women, or the upsurge in black voices and visibility, nonetheless soon transpires in the form of a pervasive existential malaise; which, after having “[risen] up madly, in anger,” would guarantee the male hero then “sank down,” a helpless “captive to misery” (Bellow, 1956 110). Sure enough, if one were to consider mid-twentieth-century masculinity by an assortment of postwar US fiction, as in the context of this thesis, the notion of a degraded male self-sufficiency becomes acutely apparent, and what may primarily distinguish such a discussion of American manhood from those before it is precisely this growing awareness of the penetrability of the male psyche. A very marked example of such vulnerability comes, of course, from Alex Portnoy, the angst-ridden antihero of Roth’s *Portnoy’s Complaint* (1967), who pleads to his psychiatrist: “Doctor, I can’t stand anymore being frightened like this over nothing! Bless me with manhood! Make me brave! Make me strong! Make me *whole*!” (36). The confessional tenor of Roth’s writing here explicitly references the widening influence of professional psychology and psychiatry in a therapeutic and economically affluent post-World War II American culture; and, in so doing, profiles the contemporary ideological

context in which male predicaments were also often being framed. Indeed, Andrea Dworkin makes the profound point that “the power of men is first a metaphysical assertion of *self*” (13). Portnoy’s professed wholesale loss of *self* - corroborated in the statement, “my life isn’t my own” (Roth 87) - thereby equates to a large-scale loss of male power, chiefly in relation to the totality of economic changes now neatly dovetailed with new ‘rights’ for women and racial and sexual minorities; thus once more undermining the notion of patriarchy purely as a question of male manners and motilities, divorced from the material, social, and organisational infrastructure as some kind of “bedrock,” or “priori” phenomenon emblematic of men’s “intrinsic authority” (Dworkin 13).

Amplified in large by contemporaneous sociology and feminism, David Morgan argues accordingly that such newfound focus on gender, especially ‘masculinity,’ as a kind of “cultural resource [...] shaped in particular contexts,” ratifies the idea that ‘private’ problems are, in actual fact, individual manifestations of ‘political’ issues (111). In this sense, the so-called ‘crisis’ of masculinity discourse can be seen as the reflection of a culture in which expectations for “self-realisation” and “individual fulfilment” – influenced partly by the liberationist movements of the 1960s, but also primarily by the antecedent shifts in US economic life, specifically in the way work was organised - were all-round “greater than ever before” (Cuordileone 138). With his masculine self-image now mediated through compromise and conformity, the considerable unease surrounding the corporatized ‘man in the grey flannel suit’ certainly signposts a distinct and deliberate shift in the principal preoccupations of leading scholars since the 1950s.⁶ That is to say, whereas Depression-era writers such as John Steinbeck had been largely concerned with issues of class, poverty, exploitation, and the unjustifiable “hunger in the wretched bellies of [...] children” (*The Grapes of Wrath*, 1939 46), mid-century novelists sooner lamented the beleaguered state of the modern American psyche; creating middle-class white male ‘anti-heroes’ so engrossed in

⁶ First appearing as the title of Sloan Wilson’s 1955 novel, the idiom of “the man in the gray flannel suit” famously anthropomorphized the suffocating sameness of corporate America. The phrase entered US popular vernacular in the late fifties, and has continued to appear in references of sociologists to America’s discontented businessmen.

their own private dissatisfaction and psychic malaise, they “didn’t seem even to realise that there was a depression” (Bellow, 1956 15). Many mid-century social critics, including Erich Fromm, C. Wright Mills, and William Whyte, similarly turned their attentions to the cultural ennui at the heart of American consumer aspiration, together with the emotional discontents that sprang directly from the forlorn pursuit of a marketplace masculinity. There are, however, marked differences between the novelist and the sociologist; which, according to Harold Rosenberg, can be reduced to the fact that, while Bellow or Roth trot the likes of Tommy Wilhelm and Alex Portnoy “out on the stage” and have them “do it,” that is, enact the modern melodrama of masculinity, these said social critics rather write “*about* social characters” as the “personification of a behaviour system,” devoting their studies to analysing the social processes behind an ascendant “type” of contemporary male character, “deficient in individuality by definition” (Rosenberg 319-20). With reference to the advent of such influential works as *The Sane Society* (Fromm 1951), *White Collar* (Mills 1953), and *The Organisation Man* (Whyte 1956), Cuordileone consequently contends that never before had the issue of ‘self’ come under “such scrutiny” - a measure of the debilitating psychological implications of a modern ‘mass society,’ in which the individual, “unloosed from traditional social kinship or spiritual moorings,” becomes ever more overwhelmed by the impersonal and self-impairing forces of a mass-produced culture. (98).

In terms of this growing body of discourse on mass psychology, theorist Daniel Bell further alleges that, by way of creating a homogenous national experience for many Americans, the concept of mass culture generated critical anxieties around the subject of autonomy. For Bell, this fear and neurosis - specifically pertaining to whether it was possible to achieve that “independent, well-fortified sense of self” so central to nineteenth-century male identity within a post-industrial society – was the “single most compelling problem for postwar intellectuals and social critics” (21). It is, therefore, useful to appreciate this “step away from public institutions and their limitations,” toward more “private ailments and inner dissatisfaction,” first and foremost as an indicator of America’s economic recovery, which brought Americans a dual legacy of unprecedented material affluence and unparalleled male

anxiety in the second half of the twentieth-century (Cuordileone 98). Indeed, as white-collar men increasingly filled the managerial ranks of large corporations, and as values constantly translated into economic calculability, there was a growing sense that - despite the greater interdependence of a postwar mass society - individuals were ever more estranged from one another. The modern-day increases in wealth and national prosperity, far from delivering a sense of personal liberation from the deprivations of the past, furthermore seemed only to exacerbate the psychological affliction of being a man. Once fears of economic crisis were put to rest in the boom years of the fifties, the very absence of problems became, then, something of a problem in itself; namely, that which Barbara Ehrenreich deemed “the problem of problemlessness,” within which lay the resultant complacency and apathy, if not “wasting ennui” of America’s cumulative successes (1989 19).

C. Wright Mills’ study of postwar middle-class consciousness notably shares such sentiments, and upon considering the potential psychological effects of consumerism, materialism, and widespread suburbanisation on the American character, he deduces that: “the decline of the free entrepreneur and the rise of the dependent employee on the American scene, [paralleled] the decline of the independent individual and the rise of the little man in the American mind” (Mills xiii). He goes on to argue that, in a world presently crowded by forces larger and more powerful - i.e. the group, the organisation, a mass society - this new species of “little man” does not practice an autonomous way of life, for he always inevitably ‘belongs’ to someone else (xii). Indeed, whether it is the government, the corporation, or the military, this “small creature” is always “somebody’s man,” newly conditioned by the “impersonal principle of organisation” into that which may be “acted upon,” but which must “not act” (Mills 109, xii). With the formerly “free hero” thereby displacing responsibility unto the external authority of an antithetically bureaucratic and ‘feminised’ organisation - and so depriving himself of the necessary control to fulfil traditional masculine gender norms - he becomes merely a “dwarfed and helpless victim,” who believes he must, for security’s sake, “strain to attach himself somewhere,” and routinely “accept” his future to be determined as much by the system as by himself (Mills xi). In this respect he is akin to

William Whyte's 'organisation man,' whose primary psychological affliction was his "need to belong," that is, to 'conform' (7).

Like so many professional men in the postwar era, Whyte's organisation man worked in middle management within a large corporation. He was characteristically a 'committee man,' who assumed as a matter of habit that 'the group,' a board of compatible members committed to cooperation with one another in pursuit of some mutually conceived project, could accomplish more in the way of progress, proficiency and enterprise than the individual acting alone. In contrast to Max Weber's classic definition of the 'Protestant Ethic,' which so appealed to nineteenth-century self-made notions of American manhood - and which was based on the Puritan view that a man's duty and responsibility is to achieve success through "self-reliance, self-discipline," and "frugality" (Weber 71) - Whyte attributed his presumptions to the 'social ethic,' a contemporary body of thought defined by its belief in 'belongingness' as the ultimate need of the individual. This belief not only resulted in the decline of individuality so central to the self-made man's masculinity, but moreover, "made morally legitimate the pressures of society against the individual" (Whyte 7). By institutionalising the ascendancy of the majority, this purported utopian faith in effect rationalised the organisation's demand for conformity and mediocrity through the guise of ultimate harmony. Ill-equipped to see anything but such "beneficence" in the social ethic, the individual hence naturally came to distrust himself, and reinterpret the "group pressures as a release," with "authority as freedom" (Whyte 59).

Whyte's contemporary characterological profiling to this end highlights a level of organisation fealty that subsumes the individual to a group while simultaneously converting what would seem, in other times, "a bill of no rights into a restatement of individualism" (Whyte 6). Even though he may embody the product of a democratic and economically liberal society, Whyte's obliging 'committee man' was at once the ignorant captive of its progeny mass culture, and his sensitivity to the "measure of conformity [...] organisation work demands" meant he devoted virtually all his energies into finding out exactly the "right pattern to conform to" (Whyte 155). Veiled beneath the bogus pretence of 'belonging,' the

social ethic is therefore far from benign, as it lures men into surrender not by clear coercion, but by a deceptively benevolent ethos; one which not only allows submission to the group to “feel ok,” but categorically shepherds people with the force of a moral imperative that “it is right to be that way” (Whyte 393). As Bellow explains in *Seize the Day* - a novel notably published the same year as Whyte’s *The Organisation Man* - “in the old days a man was put into prison for debt, but there were subtler things now” (1956 30). When Bellow speaks of “subtler things” he is referring to that implicitly imprisoning, authoritarian doctrine of ‘togetherness,’ that would evidently become the ideological means through which an abstract organisation could then colonise the individual psyche, destroy the boundaries between self and set, and so succeed to steal a man’s very soul by implanting in him hopes and desires that deterministically conform to capitalistic needs and interests. By virtue of this “larger body,” men were systemically “primed and did not know it” (Bellow, 1956 84, 11); and this is one reason, Mills argues, “why ordinary men, when they are in trouble or when they sense that they are up against issues,” cannot not find “clear targets for thought or for action” (48). It is also why these men, when “dreaming the old agrarian dream in their rent-a-car convertible,” could not determine what it was that ironically imperilled the Western values of the free man they once discerned to be duly theirs (Roth 186).

Significantly, Whyte focuses less on this absence of autonomy than on the deficiency of drive exhibited by the organisation man; as he, with no real idiosyncratic traits or deeply held beliefs to compel him forward to achieve some aim, seeks above all else to simply ‘fit in’ - that is to say, “the feeling of security and certainty [that] derives always from assured membership of a group” (Whyte 35). Though there are considerable differences between Mills’ “little man” and Whyte’s archetypal “organisation man,” both critics share this central concern over the frequency with which middle-class Americans appear to surrender openly the individual ‘me’ for a collective ‘we,’ so as to give ‘me’ identity and indemnity through conformity. The collective emphasis on this concept of security as the paramount aim of life paradoxically stems, however, from the very fact that people felt increasingly insecure as a result of over-conformity. The real issue lies, therefore, not so

much with the organisation, but rather with the male employee's "worship of it" - and the real danger not in his "being dominated," but in his "surrendering" (Whyte 35).

In a culture where mercenary and mechanical values have been apotheosized, it is, sure enough, the emergence of such a collectivised and hollow personality – defined by Erich Fromm as the "market-oriented personality" born of commercial capitalism (1955 16) – that then elicits a crisis in the production of masculinity. In the same manner as Mills and Whyte, Fromm recognises the pathology of conformity as a "socially patterned defect," through which an estranged population adjusts to an "unhealthy society," and according to which the contemporary alienated man is inwardly compelled to submit to the "false consciousness" of economic authoritarianism (1955 409). In Fromm's words:

In order that any society may function well its members must acquire the kind of character which makes them *want* to act in the way they *have* to act as members of the society or of a special class within it. They have to *desire* what objectively is *necessary* for them to do. *Outer force* is replaced by *inner compulsion*, and by the particular kind of human energy which is channelled into character traits.⁷

The bearing of Fromm's analysis here is that the biddable blocking of self-awareness transpires not externally, but internally, thereby naturalising and concealing those capitalist structures of oppression by deploying and diffusing desires inspired by American aspirations of personal liberty and social mobility. One's own "betrayal," in other words, "is inside of you," lurking "unconsciously, un-awaringly in the depths of the organism," and hence you have no option but to "obey him like a slave" (Bellow, 1956 71). With much of what "he thinks and says" mimicking much of what "everybody else thinks and says," it is, then, wrong to surmise that the damaged ego of the typical male conformist has any conscious capacity, or actual "ability to think originally" – that is, "for himself" – which alone would give substance to capitalism's claim that nobody can interfere with the expression, or the direction of consumer desire and freedom of choice (Fromm 1941 90). Instead, the concept

⁷ Erich Fromm, "Individual and Social Origins of Neurosis," *Personality in Nature, Society and Culture*. Ed. Clyde Kluckhohn and Henry Murray (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1948), p. 380.

of will is very much superfluous, and that of freedom paradoxically subordinate, all by means of the prominence consumer culture ascribes them. Arthur Koestler expands on this point when he states, “smooth adjustment to a deformed society creates deformed individuals” (23), which implies that middle class American men - whether they knew it or not - were by and large psychologically plagued by the very prosperity that seemingly promised them sovereignty as ‘individuals’ and ‘Americans’ and, of course, as ‘men.’

Indeed, now merely one of thousands of ‘grey men’ dislocated between the constant surface “pressure of the crowd” and the “cavernous distortions underneath” (Bellow, 1956 116, 5), the modern middle-class male was in effect drained of any individuality, and seen to have no private inner self, only a homogenised and collective persona. As a reaction to this, Norman Mailer, in his 1965 novel *An American Dream*, thus purposely correlates the “void” upon which the organisational “personality was built” with the concurrent state of former congressman and war-hero Stephen Rojack’s masculinity (7); i.e. as the “manifest of how unconsummated and unmasculine was the core of [his] force” within a postwar consumerist culture (Mailer 18). Convinced that the very “substance” of his inner self had, to all intents and purposes, “[fallen] out of [him],” the coordination of Rojack’s masculine identity with contemporary capitalist economics directly discloses the extent to which the modern middle-class man – being no one, and nothing at all - could be made into anything the company, the corporation, or the market needed him to be, yet always at the detrimental expense of a virile sense of self. It is, of course, through such an overt awareness of this kind of manufactured submission of masculine power that Mailer, along with the likes of Bellow and Roth, subsequently gave rise to a literary litany of male social, spiritual, and somatic wounds in modern American fiction during the 1960s. By way of literally “materialising the crisis of white masculinity,” and, whether intentional or not, “exposing the lie of disembodied normativity so often attached to white masculinity,” it is precisely this emergent emphasis on the physical and emotional wounds of a “masculinity under siege” that will perhaps provide us, then, with the means for a retrospective analysis of what was felt to be the ‘real’ condition and complaint of American men in a post-liberationist era (Robinson 6).

A useful key to begin interpreting this 'post-heroic' literary stance in terms of the conceptual framework outlined above is arguably through the critical analyses of Leslie Fiedler, which offer an intriguing portrait of the formerly male victor as male caricatured victim. Holding the increasing mechanisation of the workplace accountable for the anxiety surrounding the successful performance of masculinity, Fiedler's 1965 essay "The New Mutants" supports Fromm's view of a mass-produced 'false consciousness' as that which had effectually "shaken" American men's "faith in their primary masculine function" - that being, for Fiedler at least, "their ability to achieve the conquest (as the traditional metaphor has it) of women" (516). Insisting that these men are no longer able to exercise their "time honoured privilege of dealing out death by hand," Fiedler likewise goes on to brand them as being uncharacteristically "frightened, passive, and castrated," and cites this falsification and adulteration of the active, phallicized male into "non- or anti-male," as an extremely dangerous situation with far-reaching complications (516-17). Residing at the very core of Fiedler's contention, therefore, is that essentially nationalised, or else amorously antinomian 'men without women' fantasy; embryonically evident at least from Washington Irving's "Rip Van Winkle" (1819), to Ernest Hemingway's eponymous collection of short stories, and through to the mid-twentieth-century manifestation of such archetypal Hollywood heroes as Clint Eastwood, John Wayne and, by the same token, Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger thereafter.⁸ As already noted above, this idyllic ideal - by way of which the 'poor' American man, "at last reduced almost to despair," opposes the encroaching, constricting, and more often than not female-identified society by privileging raw individuality and "[strolling] into the woods" (Irving 9) - logically stems from the eminent belief that there is no proper place for 'true,' that is, primitive and violent masculine impulses within a post-industrial US society.

⁸ The mythic "Men without Women" trope derives from Ernest Hemingway's eponymous collection of short stories published in 1927. Each of Hemingway's narratives deals with masculine toughness un-spoiled by woman's hand. Consequently, the hard-edged and incisive men of these stories are typically bullfighters, boxers, gangsters and gunmen, stringently set at some distance from the softening world of women and children.

Fiedler's supposition is along these lines emblematic of a modern day men's movement in the US, which grew in various forms out of the concerns of a 'small number' of white middle-class men regarding problems they in particular experienced following the overlapping onset of the women's movement and corporate collectivism in the 1960s. Such men, we know, felt supposedly vulnerable, vexed and victimised as it became increasingly difficult for them to perform their 'traditional' male sex roles in the face of societal change. As a result of such feelings of instability, antifeminist writers such as Richard Doyle - who, like Fiedler, was concerned with issues of male disadvantage, discrimination and, in his words, "the rape of the male" (Doyle 1) - advocated a masculinist backlash in a branch of the men's movement known as the 'men's rights movement.' If we are to take some of the aforementioned texts as pre-emptive examples, it consequently becomes clear that, when Roth's Portnoy 'complains' of feeling metaphysically "torn by desires that are repugnant to my conscience, and a conscience that is repugnant to my desires" (132) - in the same way Mailer's Rojack proclaims that he felt he had "committed hari-kari," and was "walking about with my chest physically separated from my groin" (36) - these men are not only portraying a modern subjectivity increasingly isolated from a coherent, 'well-fortified sense of self,' but, more importantly, constituting this rupture in terms of a much greater threat of psychosomatic castration felt amongst white males as a direct consequence of the unnatural exigencies in the centrist liberal world of mid-twentieth-century America. What is most telling about this, especially in terms of Fiedler and Doyle's canon, is that by way of implication, what is considered then 'natural' - and what may, in effect, authentically and affirmatively liberate their manhood from the decaying "stench of fear" they sensed as coming out of "every pore of American life" (Mailer, "The White Negro" 304) - is that traditionally virile masculine mythos in its imperialistic and murderously misogynistic reality.

To this end, the modern disjuncture between American manhood and machismo so often observed in the 1950s appears to find its symbolic antidote in the muscular rhetoric of the 'New Frontier,' which would ultimately come to define John F. Kennedy's presidency.

Indeed, not since Roosevelt had the nation been roused by a leader - who, “in the name of the reform tradition,” promised a “restoration of the nation’s vitality,” and, by extension, “American men’s virility,” through purposefulness, potency, and persistent endeavour (Cuordileone 170). At a moment when men were “looking out through their picture windows,” only to see “an endless suburb, with no horizon, no frontier, insight” (Ehrenreich, 1989 17), Kennedy’s vigorous emphasis on “courage, not complacency,” in general, and “leadership, not salesmanship,” in particular, implied that the most steadfast vehicle to reassure American manhood was the self-validating frontline violence of the hunt; which, in turn, came forth as a surrogate power source and potent proving ground for masculine recreation.⁹ American men after all needed to find some way to “rediscover masculinity,” and the fortifying austerity of the “rugged outdoors” was - thanks to JFK and his emulation of that ‘Rough Rider’ image founded in Teddy Roosevelt before him - consistently trumpeted by male liberationists as “restorative of the flagging manhood of modern civilised men” (Kimmel, 1996 100).

In a replay of the frontier quest for macho heroism, Elaine Showalter thereby describes the myriad ways “suburban, middle-aged men,” experiencing vague symptoms of “depression, fear of aging, and fatigue,” presently began to pursue a series of ‘deeply masculine’ wilderness activities, rapidly immersing themselves in “travel, adventure, and vigorous exercise” in an effort to “revive self-esteem” through primitive physicality (66). Richard Slotkin similarly stresses the extent to which the masculine hero’s concurrent focus on ‘regeneration through violence’ required a regression to a “more primitive and natural condition of life,” and, in so doing, subsequently insured the “false values” of the metropolis could be “purged” and a “new purified social contract enacted” (1992 14). Through re-enacting the predacious aspirations of America’s pastoral frontier, this primitivist devolution, in short, actively served to obscure the line between the savage and the civilised frontier hero, so to then ratify a reclamation of those well established pioneering myths of white

⁹ Quoted from the address of Senator John F. Kennedy on accepting the Democratic Party nomination for the Presidency of the United States; Memorial Coliseum, Los Angeles, 15th July, 1960.

masculinity, as well as a re-strengthening of the patriarchal paradigm within which - and, no doubt, for which - they were originally formulated.

In his literary quest for an “orgasm more apocalyptic than the one which preceded it,” Mailer sure enough appropriates this ‘frontierism’ into his own cultivation of the “psychopath in oneself” (“TWN” 319); specifically, the purportedly “crazy killer right inside” (1965 173), who in the face of the nation’s “collective failure of nerve,” creatively and courageously does whatever he feels “whenever and wherever it is possible” (“TWN” 304). This belief in the cathartic power of male violence as providing a purgative release from the “empty hypocrisies of mass conformity” (“TWN” 319) – effectually evinced in the way Stephen Rojack provocatively compares “the honourable fatigue” after strangling his wife to that of the satisfaction after a sexual act (1965 32) – nevertheless is rendered ineffectual when Nina Baym, for example, accuses critics such as Fiedler, along with his predecessors Henry Nash Smith – author of *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (1950) – and R.W.B. Lewis – creator of *The American Adam: Innocence Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (1955) – of persistently indulging in “melodramas of beset manhood,” which rather more offers a feminist counter-narrative to demythologise this canonical iconography of the “pure American self divorced from specific social circumstances” in a way that had never been possible before (Baym 133, 126). Through repudiating the traits upon which masculinity was traditionally built - namely, that which Kimmel identifies as an “impossible synthesis of sober, responsible breadwinner, imperviously stoic master of his fate, and swashbuckling hero” (1996 173) – Baym in truth bolsters the suspicion that it was not men, as such, but rather the prefabricated patriarchal prescription for masculinity that caused a crisis in male confidence and contributed to the historic oppression of women and minorities; and which, “in the end,” ensures white men themselves are always “left struggling” (Bellow, 1956 29).

In this sense, the very “deeply romantic” values and norms of the male sex role - followed by the implicit pressure on men to try and effortlessly fulfil those expected, but ultimately “delusory” masculine roles demands - are themselves the real problem in men’s

lives (Baym 127).¹⁰ The correlation between their prescribed behaviours and the feeling of secure manhood, as a matter of fact, encompasses “the peculiar burden of [men’s] existence,” which inescapably lies upon them “like an accretion, a load, a hump” (Bellow, 1956 38). Inept to “discharge” this “great weight of the unspoken,” (Bellow, 1956 22), Mailer claims that, for postwar American men in particular, the tacit pressure and compulsion to perform, or else conform, was comparable to “carrying a two-hundred pound safe up a cast-iron hill,” yet simultaneously assures his readers that true “exhilaration” may only come from “possessing such strength” (1965 16). Of course, if we go by Baym’s suggestion, Mailer’s elicitation of a barbarous hypermasculinity, together with Kennedy’s nostalgic yearning for a warrior-presidency, effectively resurface as the fantasised compensatory phallic conferral of a hysterical manhood that feels repeatedly inadequate in its ability to live up to the very contradictory and confusing messages of the male sex role identity model. In other words, by way of beginning to deconstruct ‘masculinity’ itself, the honest self-reflective lens of contemporaneous feminism jeopardises the ‘dominant fiction’ Kaja Silverman credits to be at work “fortifying masculinity against any knowledge of the void upon which it rests,” thereby urging new paradigms into being that more precisely reflect current social realities (1992 63).

To fully appreciate the magnitude of these paradigm shifts, we must first consider the extent to which American social structures principally rely on certain belief systems – or ideological ‘realities’ - for their sense of unity and identity. Silverman argues that the network regulating America’s intersubjective relations is woven into the era’s dominant fictions, which are “significantly inflected by the ideologies of gender, race and ethnicity” (1992 34). It follows that the particular ideology of masculinity crucial to the construction of America’s dominant fiction resides in the nation’s “cultural imaginary,” holding the

¹⁰ In the introduction to *The Forty-Nine Percent Majority* (1976), psychologist Richard Brannon summarized the male sex role into four basic rules of manhood. First of all, “No Sissy Stuff,” meaning one can never do anything that even remotely alludes to the feminine. Secondly, “Be a Big Wheel,” which advocates that masculinity be measured by power and material success. Thirdly, men must always “Be a Sturdy Oak,” since ‘real men’ show no emotions, and are emotionally reliable by being emotionally inexpressive. And lastly, “Give ‘em Hell,” which demanded men exude an aura of manly aggression (quoted by Michael Kimmel in *Manhood in America*: 1996: pp. 185).

“coherence of the male body” as a “prerequisite of the structure’s continuing function” (Silverman, 1992 63). According to Silverman, this fiction effects ‘interpellation,’ and, in that manner, manufactures and maintains a normative masculinity. For this ideology to successfully govern the male subject’s belief, however, it must necessarily intercede at the most profound level of the latter’s constitution. With the attribution of ‘reality,’ it must - strictly speaking - “bring the subject into conformity with the symbolic order by fostering normative desires and associations” (Silverman, 1992 50), and subsequently define the ‘psychic reality’ of the prototypical male via that which Annette Kolodny refers to as being “a kind of communal act of imagination” (1975 156). In this way, belief is granted then, not at the level of consciousness, but rather “at that of fantasy,” with the masculine ego situated from the very beginning in a “fictional direction,” and that which commands his belief, likewise, “profoundly phantasmagorical” (Silverman, 1992 20). Since everything that productively passes for ‘reality’ within a given social formation is articulated in relation to these conditions, they consequently represent ideological pressure points. It is, therefore, important to realise that, if ideology is central to the “maintenance of classic masculinity,” the classic semiology of masculinity is equally essential to the “maintenance of America’s governing ‘reality’” (Silverman, 1992 15). That is to say that our entire “world” depends upon the “alignment of phallus,” masculine fantasy, “and penis,” male fact (Silverman, 1992 16).

Yet given that ‘fantasy,’ arguably, “does not correspond to anything in the real,” Jacques Lacan deems the deliberately exaggerated erection of this masculine simulacrum to be, in its very positivity, a correlative and collective “signifier of castration” (1977 40). The mythic promise of a ‘new frontier’ as typified in the spectacularised image of Dirty Harry Callaghan’s .44 magnum handgun, and by John Rambo’s rippling musculature after that, along these lines is indicative of the performative veil constitutively covering American masculinity’s figurative lack; that is, the essential gap or void between the American man and the American masculine image of the ‘real’ man. Regardless of the nation’s operational values, Susan Gubar thus makes direct reference to the fact that, “all men have penises but

none possess the phallus” (54). Following Lacan’s notion of the ‘symbolic order,’ Gubar deduces that the phallus “remains a signifier beyond the reach of all human beings,” and in that way allegorically acts as part of a socio-political system premised on the fallibility of man (54). The notion that men must nevertheless “be seen to have the phallus,” and continually strive to exhibit qualities that are mythopoeically or metonymically linked to phallic illusion, in turn implies that ‘masculine’ identity and/or desire is principally detached from any biological penis (Lacan, 1977 142). ‘Masculinity,’ that is to say, comes neither from men’s bodies, nor belongs to men themselves, but is created, like Silverman suggests, through “male masochistic fantasies” (1988 206), caught up in “certain phallic prerogatives” (175), presupposed by the “ideological state apparatus” (155). With this in mind, it seems worthwhile to call attention to the fundamental ways in which Silverman’s critical language on the dominant fiction of the male phallic subject closely resembles that quoted earlier from the works of Fromm and Whyte regarding the corporatist organisation of modern America society; thus suggesting that those specifically violent codes of masculinity - which supposedly constitute the male gender’s strength and so legitimise its hegemonic status - are, in actual fact, mediated through the very same capitalist configurations of power men concurrently blamed for their castration.

For instance, if we take components of Silverman’s analysis in isolation, such as the way in which the male dominant fiction “works to bring the subject into conformity with the symbolic order by fostering normative desires and associations” (1992 50), there is little that expressly attests the masculine imperative, exclusively, as this declaration can just as easily be applied to the manner in which the wider commercial values of free market ideology - with the force of a moral and national imperative - create artificial desires of commoditised individualism and free choice to be satisfied through consumption. In the same way the cultural logic of late capitalism promises total fulfilment without limit - whereas in fact this is a limit - the male sex role model promises to make men ‘*whole*’ through internalised schemes of thought that are the apprehended product, and surreptitious expression of power relations that cut across the structures and strictures of American culture and society.

In theory, these cultural/social ‘power relations’ are akin to the institutional patterns of ‘symbolic domination’ identified by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu; which, in his view, are themselves the by-product of an “incessant (and therefore historical) labour of reproduction,” to which “singular agents (including men, with weapons such as physical violence and symbolic violence) contribute” (34).¹¹ Significantly, Bourdieu argues that the effect of such symbolic domination is exerted, “not in the pure logic of knowing consciousness,” but through everyday social systems of “perception, appreciation and actions that are constitutive of habitus” (2001 37). In this respect, and in terms of our current analysis of American masculinity, it is necessary to make note here of Judith Butler’s account of gender, which she construes as being a kind of socially constructed, or “tenuously constituted” performance, “instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*” (1988 179). The impact of one’s social context on ‘gender’ of course obliges acts of cognition to take place below the level of the decisions of consciousness and the controls of will; making them, instead, mere socially inculcated enactments of practical recognition or logical necessity. Taking on gender, in other words, “becomes a kind of consumerism” (Butler, 1988 xxvii), through which the specific notion of ‘*manliness*’ - understood as “sexual or social reproductive capacity, but also as the capacity to fight and to exercise violence” (Bourdieu, 2001 51) – becomes, for American men at least, a socially propagated duty to consume and reproduce the dominant master narrative of white frontier masculinity.

To this end, the ideology of an imperialist, imperious American manhood transpires as the produce of a social labour of capitulation, at the end of which an accepted form of masculine domination – “instituted by one of the invisible demarcation lines laid down by the social world and known and recognised by all” - inscribes itself in a biological nature and becomes “embodied social law,” that is, patriarchy (Bourdieu, 2001 50). To expose the carefully structured commodification of masculinity in this way, is, as such, to critically undercut traditional essentialist conceptions of American manhood by implying that the

¹¹Although Bourdieu’s work is of course about the French rather than the American culture and society, his insights clearly can and do apply to other cultural contexts.

individualist frontiersman, in empirical harmony with the conformist organisation man, acted merely in accordance to the learned orthodoxies of a social code predicated upon the mutually reinforcing mythologies of westward expansion and expanding capitalism; that is to say, on a 'capitalist spirit' of genocidal displacement and denial that effectively consolidated the nation's colonial and capitalist wealth. It follows that the disjuncture we see in modern American fiction, between desired male 'acts' - as personified by figures such as Wayne - and directly 'lived experience' - as cumulatively realised in America's loss of the Vietnam War - is demonstrative of the dangerously derivative structure by which "hegemonic gender is itself produced," or else of the very 'unnaturalness' of those internalised and violent ideals which, by way of "[claiming] naturalness and originality," made men appear to be more individualist than they actually are (Butler, 1990 125).

Despite its ultimately problematic, if not paradoxical nature in the construction of masculine identity, this violent "immersion in the symbolic at the expense of the real," as Sally Bachner terms it, is often still initially represented in American fiction as a profitable practice in men's gendered existential project (73). From Mailer's Stephen Rojack to Chuck Palahniuk's Tyler Durden of *Fight Club* (1996), the regenerative powers commonly mapped onto violence by late-twentieth-century male protagonists – whether in the form of terrorism, torture, brutal rape or murder - make this element of gender construction both diverting and divisive. What makes authors' representations of masculine violence from the late 1960s onwards so distinctly compelling, however, is the extent to which their works, for the first time, are openly animated by this suspicion that the violence and suffering that takes place outwith the hegemonic social codes of middle-class America are the "product of the very economic and political practices that guarantee US prosperity and security" (Bachner 8).

James Gilbert notably substantiates the opinion as outlined above that this critique of American masculinity altogether reached the political and literary spectrum in the mid-1960s. He goes to add that, "once again, in the 1980s and 1990s," consistently "strong echoes describing a male crisis could be heard" (Gilbert 80). Prior to Gilbert's contention, Todd Gitlin similarly averred that the "unsettling sixties" were, to all intents and purposes,

“rewritten by the Eighties” (12). These remarks are certainly true, and with such texts as Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian* (1985) or Bret Easton Ellis’ *American Psycho* (1992), we can see further iterations regarding the psychic fault lines of a deterministically violent, patriarchal masculinity as being reflective of the violent excesses of Ronald Reagan’s supply-side economics. In spite of the plausibility of their accounts of modern American masculinity, however, it is hard to ignore the fact that both Gilbert and Gitlin very obviously omit a whole intermediate decade from their cultural inquiry; which in turn raises the question of what, exactly, happened to American men in the 1970s?

In terms of literary criticism on masculinity, the seventies has, in truth, more often than not remained unexamined or “subsumed” under the residue of a ‘Sixties era,’ as Will Kaufman puts it, or else as a dormant precursor for the retributive masculinity of the 1980s (2). While in many ways the seventies “arrived to its place of recognition in American intellectual history by a series of undermining acts,” and so may seem an “especially implausible candidate for marking the end of an era” (Kaufman 2), the assumption that the 1970s bears no unique relevance in the study of American masculinity is to discredit the myriad of fictional texts centrally concerned with manhood which arose out of the era alone. The lacuna evident in Gitlin and Gilbert’s respective studies thereby necessitates a substantial re-consideration, and will be the central premise of the following chapters of this thesis.

Indeed, beginning in 1969 with John Cheever’s considerably neglected *Bullet Park*, through to the concluding years of the decade with New Journalist Michael Herr’s equally forgotten *Dispatches* (1977), this thesis will trace chronologically a series of seemingly incongruous fictional texts from writers James Dickey, Toni Morrison and Cormac McCarthy so as to stress their instructive correspondences with regard to the role violence, mythology, and commodity culture play in each author’s portrayal of modern American masculinity. This is not to say, however, that the violent intersections of mythology and materialism I illustrate here in terms of American manhood are limited only to the particular works analysed in each chapter; for various utterances of the same themes can be found in

the authors' other works - from Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977) to Cormac McCarthy's *Suttree* (1979) - as well as in such contemporaneous texts as *Requiem for a Dream* by Hubert Selby Jr. (1977). In a larger sense, the analyses offered here might also be applied to the work of authors outside of these exact economic and ethnic backgrounds. In other words, because the protagonists in the works I discuss here are formed in response to hegemonic models of heteronormative masculinity, their fictional dilemmas might similarly elucidate the locus of some of the gendered oppressions and identity crises that extend beyond white middle-class and black working-class American men, and into a variety of different marginalised cultures ranging from the Asian American masculinities featured in Shawn Wong's *Homebase* (1979), to the homosexual manhood explored in Andrew Holleran's *Dancer from the Dance* (1978). Nevertheless, by opening with the closure of the sixties, and dedicating each chapter to a singular work by this handful of authors, I hope to not only draw attention to a number of critically ignored texts from writers Cheever, Dickey and Herr by placing them alongside more acutely acclaimed authors such as Morrison and McCarthy - nor do I wish to simply accentuate unexplored parallels between apparently incompatible male character types, although this is very much pertinent to my study - but to furthermore highlight the extent to which the fifties and sixties were actually the restrained forerunner for a historically specific form of de-mythologised American masculinity that emerged full-blown in popular culture no later than the 1970s.

In Chapter One, *Bullet Park* acts as the basis for understanding the later texts, as Cheever's brand of suburban disillusionment not only conceives the dysfunctional dimensions of masculine dejection as being somehow derivative of suburbia's larger malady, but furthermore addresses the fractured principles upholding America's traditional values and beliefs. That is to say, rather than simply calling attention to the inevitable conflict between the conformist ideologies of the postwar corporate world and the dormant desires of the atomized suburbanite, Cheever's doppelgänger narrative utilises the prevailing cultural view of suburbia as a pillar of postwar American security, stability, and social adjustment so as to highlight how, even as the new suburban landscape apparently disrupted traditional

national conceptions of American manhood, it also equally resembled the principal nature of such male conceptions. Considering Cheever's text alongside an interrelated interpretation of contemporaneous sociological and psychological theory by the likes of David Riesman, William Whyte - and, in turn, Barbara Ehrenreich and Annette Kolodny - will, then, allow for an introductory exploration into the ways in which his portrayal of a disenchanted white-collar and suburban ennui treads the fault lines of laissez-faire capitalism; and, in so doing, succeeds to uncover the sources of masculine dissatisfaction in their more true and underground origins.

Chapter Two investigates these abject origins in depth, employing James Dickey's *Deliverance* (1970) as an example of one of the era's signal texts about the dangers of a symbolically 'western' voyage of masculinist discovery. In many ways, Dickey's text takes up where Cheever's *Bullet Park* leaves off; gradually rejecting the false promise of liberation constituting the suburbs and offering, not just a diagnosis of blocked masculinity, but also an exploration into the prescription for its release. Indeed, drawing on the archetypal hero quest for self-transcendence through a merger with nature, Dickey frames his story of male regeneration as a classic frontier narrative. Yet, through his primitive and penetrative exploration into the political and physical dynamics of male rape, the ambivalence surrounding the mythic American ideal is made apparent, thus exposing not just its failure in contemporary America, but, moreover, its impossibility in the first place. In this sense, I will proceed to determine Dickey's discerning search for masculine liberation as an indicator of the bankruptcy of the myth of masculinity. With reference to critics such as Richard Slotkin, Jonathan Mitchell, and Elaine Showalter, the theory of masculine degeneration as experienced by Dickey's masculine anti-heroes will, in fact, be reconsidered as a direct result of this myth of 'regeneration through violence,' and as the inevitably damaged effect of the masculinity trope and its attendant romantic embodiments.

This violent pursuit of mythicized masculinity along these lines undermines any fabled white narrative of American manhood; ultimately discarding the male characters of Dickey's text into a fatal environment of self-renewing expectations and self-validating

imperatives. Having said that, it is important to recognise that, despite the paradoxical nature of these cultural constructions of masculinity, and while white middle-class men have no doubt internalised these socially-inculcated needs and desires, they are still very much able to institute dominance over their surroundings. In contrast, when faced with structural impediments to realising or exerting such masculine desires, the male subject who deviates from the norm is reduced to a vacuum, pathologically out of balance with mainstream society. Within such conventional definitions, this male subject is denied the means to enact traditional roles of masculinity, and it is the black man who consequently experiences more anomie than any other in US culture. Chapter Three therefore considers Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970), exploring the ways in which her male characters highlight the inadequacy of applying white American norms to black American behaviour.

The Bluest Eye is rarely discussed in terms of the masculine, with most of the text's criticism being focused on the author's consideration of the feminine. The extent to which Morrison understands her male characters as being, "in their contempt for their blackness," prevented from self-realisation by things that they have incorporated into their own psyche, including the monolithic prescription of a white American masculinity, is nevertheless highly significant (65). By continually falling victim to the failings of white structures, the black community's appetites are, in truth, misshapen by the adaptations of white sexual mores, deterministically resulting in a sexual disorientation frequently manifest in incestuous paedophilia. Through shifting the reader's "gaze" away from the black male figure to focus on the white power structures that cause such black figures to abuse each other for predominance, Morrison thereby uncovers the lack of supportive structures that would allow characters such as Cholly Breedlove to cooperate in the making of meaning. What is more, whilst it may seem inconceivable to relate a "burned-out black man" (127) such as Cholly to the likes of Cheever's Eliot Nailles or Dickey's Ed Gentry, the inclusion of Morrison's 'womanist' insight into the relationships between African American men and women, together with the work of bell hooks, Barbara Christian, and Jane Davis, will provide a thoroughly effective mediation on the many variations in American masculinity. That is to

say, through employing the work of an African American female – who, in the words of Zora Neale Hurston, has been the embodied “mule of de world” in terms of white western patriarchy since the very beginning (19) – Morrison’s unfiltered depiction of black masculinities may creatively refute the idea that a singular uniform manhood exists, and in so doing then provide the means of constructing new goals for all men in American culture.

The courage Morrison shows in connecting her male protagonists with the most abhorrent crimes against nature - including rape, incest, and paedophilia – together with the clarity she demonstrates in contextualising these themes of violent corruption in terms of white western tenets of capitalist ownership and beauty - has not, however, always been so readily praised with regards to the work of her male contemporaries. Cormac McCarthy’s *Child of God* (1973), for example, has frequently been derided and dismissed by feminist critics as the product of a misogynist due to its extremely controversial representations of male serial killing and necrophilia. For this reason, Chapter Four recuperates McCarthy’s text within a feminist reading, with the goal of more clearly illuminating the underlying factors that contribute to the text’s gender politics. I endeavour to demonstrate the manner in which McCarthy actually directs protagonist Lester Ballard’s murderous misogyny as a means to a practical, sexual end, adopting the theme of necrophilia so as to stress the reality of women as sexuality property, and the extent to which man uses ‘objects’ to know himself at once as man and subject. In this way, we can read *Child of God* beyond a mere conflation of author and protagonist, and furthermore as a gothic allegory; condemning the social ills of nationalistic ideals by positioning the serial killer as both reflective and symptomatic of an American culture of materialism. An examination of the progressive perversion of this “child of god” in such terms will, to be precise, signal the novel’s resolute engagement with the epochal processes of capitalist restructuring in which it arises; and, what is more, position this particular reading of the text as a discourse of men in crisis that stands apart from any previous feminist criticism ever offered on the novel or its author.

Finally, Chapter Five will complete the main body of this thesis with a study of Herr’s *Dispatches*, with the specific aim of illuminating how its distinct ‘new’ journalistic

literary style may serve, in various ways, to confront traditional orders of meaning, and thereby take a first step towards potentially disrupting those intimate structures that instill war and gender as rich sites of truth-making processes in modern American society. By taking an assertive look beyond the crystallized formations of mythic masculinity in warfare and turning one's eye toward the candid "death, blindness, loss of legs, arms or balls" (14), I will consider the manner in which Herr's text succeeds to expose a deep gulf; a quite literal visceral void manifest as a "bloody raw [...] wound" (170), between the consciousness of Americans and the actuality of the Vietnam war - that, from the beginning, produced an artificial fictive reality conditioning the character and course of the experience of American men in and at war.

Of course, the common threads that connect Herr's work to the other texts discussed here ultimately demonstrate that the 'beginning of the end' for American men did not commence in 1956 with Bellow's text, just as much as the war in Vietnam did not really begin in 1955. The truth is, "you couldn't use standard methods to date the doom; might as well say that Vietnam was where the Trail of Tears was headed all along, the turnaround point where it would touch and come back to form a containing perimeter; might just as well lay it on the proto-Gringos who found the New England woods too raw and empty for their peace and filled them up with their own imported devils" (Herr 47). In other words, you might as well say that which American soldiers and correspondents initially "didn't know," for it "took the war to teach it" (Herr 20); that the war in Vietnam was being fought for reasons that had very little to do with Vietnam itself, and everything to do with American masculinity.

~

And so, "Now vee may perhaps to begin. Yes?" (Roth 274).

Chapter One

“The land that he saw looked like a paradise. It was not, he knew”:

Suburbia and the Maladjusted American Male in John Cheever’s *Bullet Park*

“Little boxes on the hillside,
Little boxes made of ticky tacky,
Little boxes on the hillside,
Little boxes all the same.
There’s a green one and a pink one
And a blue one and a yellow one,
And they’re all made out of ticky tacky
And they all look just the same.”

Malvina Reynolds, “Little Boxes” (1962)

Often pictured as a time of exceptional stability by the popular culture of later generations, the postwar American epoch of 1950s conformism and complacency in reality marked a moment of rapid social change. Certainly for white, middle-class men the period connoted one of expeditious adjustment, as a pervading managerial, service-based and family-orientated template of masculinity emerged, respectively reducing the influence of any traditional delineations of American manhood based on production or control. The rise and decline of such male personality modes logically corresponds with concurrent economic, social, and demographic forces and shifts; specifically, the wholesale move in America from a capital-accumulating and production-oriented economy to an affluent and commercial consumerist society. As David Potter explains, the hierarchy of corporations that arose out of the boom years of the fifties sparked a bureaucratic renegotiation of older conceptions of individualism and personal ambition. Whereas the formerly free industrialist found his success through “competitive and self-disciplined [labour],” the now servile, white-collar employee sooner sought the “domestic [rewards]” of such work as opposed to the pursuit of goals and work itself (Potter xxiii). The design of this “new and improved [mid-century] masculine identity” was, thus, fundamentally “detached” from the “[self-made] male

entrepreneur of the early American metropolis or frontier plane,” and fashioned, instead, by the standardised “grey flannelled consumer” who “dwelled in the suburbs” amid the “leisure products and lifestyle amenities [of] a burgeoning mass-market economy” (Potter 70).

Rather than welcoming these societal changes, however, social commentators of the 1950s still clung to the self-made man type as the only acceptable form of hegemonic masculinity. As already outlined in the introduction to this thesis, from the likes of Erich Fromm to C. Wright Mills and William Whyte, there is a multitude of evidence to suggest a combination of sociologists, psychologists, historians and literary critics took umbrage with the materialising managerial mould in the belief that such abrupt alterations in work and community had diminished the public space for the performance of masculinity - and, as such, caused men to subject themselves to the control of other men and institutions. In hindsight, K.A. Cuordileone insists that this critical step away from “public institutions and their limitations,” towards more “private ailments and inner dissatisfaction,” ultimately reflected the postwar economic recovery and the arrival of an affluent society (98). In other words, once fears of economic crisis were put to rest in the boom years of the fifties, affluence itself became the problem, with the great retreat into private life generating chronic concerns about the psychological effects of consumerism, materialism, and widespread suburbanisation on the American character.

No doubt these were the days of national self-congratulation and complacency, wherein American men of all social disciplines looked for the comfortable and the accepted, only to succumb to utter lethargy. In this mounting consumer culture of isolating masses, the coordination of masculine identity with capitalist economics in effect posited the American as something that could be made, and hence the deeply unhappy ‘private’ domain of the embodied subject was soon recast into otherwise impassive ‘public’ spectacle of the market. Indeed, without any natural common ties or genuine mutual trust, the “cash nexus” that “[linked] one man to another in transient contact” had been made to “bite deeper into all areas of life and relations” (Mills 188). The leisure sphere becomes, then, the centre of “character-forming influences, of identification models,” and to effectively sustain one’s

nobility - that is, one's self-respectability in the eyes of other people - it was necessary for the middle-class male to "display the [relevant] tokens of [his] economic worth" (Mills 238, 256). The hollow lure of commodity culture thus appeals to, and perpetuates that unsatisfiable need for approval through emulative consumption, with its chief pleasure principle furthermore succeeding to draw men away from the public realm of the workplace, and into the traditionally 'female' spheres of consumerism and domesticity. Appearing as it did in this period of economic ease and monopoly capitalism, the suburban landscape thereby stands as the material counterpart to specific wants and tendencies in American culture apparent from the postwar years onward.

The development and subsequent vast expansion of this unique landscape known as suburbia involved the construction of not only a specific kind of physical geography, but specifically new psychic and emotional topographies as well, and so can be read as affecting manifold cultural practices and anxieties that helped to define American society in the second half of the twentieth century. The departure toward the American 'suburbs' initially began before the turn of the century, encouraged at first by the coach and ferry, and then hastened by the development of the railroad and the automobile. By 1925, 'suburbanisation' was becoming a promising national process, yet it was not until the economically booming years of the fifties and sixties that the trend arrived as a recognised and autonomous political phenomenon complete with its own cultural values, social behaviours, and fixed iconographies.¹² That the evolution of the suburban environment – markedly in this post-World War Two era – holds as a significant cultural development is, then, evinced by the fact that, at the close of the twentieth century, the United States was primarily a suburban nation, with far more Americans residing in the suburbs than in either urban or rural areas.

¹² In *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanisation of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), Kenneth Jackson notes that, while this expansion itself was in demographic terms a process of 'suburbanisation,' the trend through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was for cities to annex the villages into which they expanded. Once annexation efforts had collapsed in the early twentieth century, commuter suburbs began to sprout up across the postwar nation as independent entities (138-156).

Far beyond this demographic revolution of the suburban terrain, however, is the centrality of the suburban experience to making sense of everyday life in the mid-twentieth century. Instantly recognisable from what Robert Beuka describes as its “uniform architectural [style] and landscape designs,” from the “smoking barbecue [and] the swimming [pools],” from the rows of “identical [white] houses on identical [green] plots” and their anxiously tended yards and separating hedges, the American suburb routinely calls to mind a familiar “string of images,” of “loaded signifiers” that, taken together, denote a contemporary American vision of the ‘good life,’ or what passes for it (2-4). Indeed, with its “unassuming architectural likeness” and “uncluttered, contiguous park like landscapes,” the postwar suburb offered its resident neighbours evidence of their egalitarianism, thus suggesting the “utopian ideal of perfect community” not only through “similar experience and social stature,” but also through a sense of shared ‘belongingness’ in a communal space (Beuka 5). From the postwar years onwards, people thence flocked to the promised land of suburbia in pursuit of a utopian perfectibility, ultimately representative of a patriotic and innocent bygone era in America. Yet given the Fordist commercial climate of this postwar period, meant any utopian morals associated with suburban living were in effect reduced to paying off a mortgage.

The shift from industrial to monopoly capitalism undoubtedly made a mockery of the values and ideals America traditionally epitomised, and though the state continued to romanticise visions of freedom and liberty, those ‘visions’ centred increasingly on homeownership and the achievement of financial security. Certainly as “political borders between streets, neighbourhoods, cities, and nations slowly [dissolved] into pockets of economic and cultural crossroads,” the American postwar suburb resolutely preserved the frontier illusion of “communal individualism” within a more contained design of “high-tech domiciles and gated communities” (Potter 70). For suburban historians Rosalyn Baxandall and Elizabeth Ewen, such fostering of a “suburbanisation,” in truth, served only to facilitate the emergence of a new, landed middle-class, amid which “property” could transform “greenhorns into middle-class Americans” (147). With this mounted significance on the

domestic market, essentially no one really “cared what Mr Kilroy did during the day, [...] [what] mattered was that his home bore the [customary] trappings of middle-class life” (Baxandall & Ewen 147). It was, at the end of the day, the satisfaction of prestige – the ‘keeping up with the Joneses,’ if you will - by way of socially conditioned consumption, not production, that was paramount, with the suburban terrain acting as the “new illusory frontier of consumption; a stage upon which to showcase American ingenuity and decadence for the rest of the world” (Potter xxiii).

Needless to say, these suburban homes and their abundant consumer contents could nonetheless never be authentically associated with the consolations of ownership, or the productive function of property to mark, even constitute, identity that has been branded ‘possessive individualism.’ Catherine Jurca usefully identifies, instead, the postwar ascendancy of a suburban “sentimental dispossession,” wherein middle-class identity was grounded, not so much in these safe havens or homes, but in its “alienation from the very environments, artefacts, and institutions that have generally been regarded as central to its identity” (7). Emerging as the immediate by-product of modern advertising and consumer culture, this sentimental dispossession principally refers to the “affective dislocation” by which suburbanites began to then experience themselves as “spiritually and culturally impoverished by prosperity” (Jurca 6). Indeed, for business and professional men, the suburban home actually replicated the “homelessness” it was supposed to alleviate, providing nothing more than a deposed “double of the office” (Jurca 137). A sight of, not a relief from, the psychological labour of anxiety about work, the material success exhibited in the “symbolology of suburbia” - in those “compulsory [...] swimming pools and [...] BBQs,” which altogether provided the vacuous impetus for on going suburban development (Beuka 123) – in consequence, both “reflected and facilitated” the values and contradictions of dominant US culture through its “collapsing of the distinction between public and private spaces” (Beuka 3). The engineered framework of suburbia, in other words, buttressed consumer ‘necessity’ with the social ethic of conformist ideology and, as a result, was

believed to be an immediate extension of the corporation, invoking the same alienating fear of the loss of individualism within the not so private realms of the domestic sphere.

As far as social values are concerned, perhaps the most fitting example of this overlap between landscape and ideology can be found in the very systematised design of the new suburbs themselves. Sociologically speaking, these prefabricated, socially homogenous villages were the “ultimate expression of the inter-changeability so sought by the organisation” (Whyte 298). As Whyte explains in “The Transients,” the “sight of rank after rank of little boxes stretching off to infinity, one hardly distinguishable from the other,” directly illustrated the mass standardisation of the middle class in the fifties, into a “group of anonymous beings submerged in a system they do not understand” (1953, 113). At once “instantly identifiable” and “unavoidably disorientating for their very sameness,” the repetitive, repressive design of the postwar suburbs subsequently eliminated any “visual evidence of difference between residents,” thus effectively positioning suburbanites as mere “interchangeable elements of an organised environment, rather than autonomous individuals active in the shaping of their own space and identities” (Beuka 110). The residential analogue to the nation corporation, this deadening assembly of identical houses became, then, symbolic of the bland materialism and mindless conformity perceived to be the most disaffecting and oppressive aspects of 1950s life in America.

The insidious spread of this homogenous environment indubitably was an alienating and thoroughly emasculating reality throughout the postwar decades, with suburbanites customarily recognised as the ultimate de-emphasised, dehumanised conformists. An effective “organisation man at home” in this “dormitory of the new managerial class,” the male suburbanite, exchanging personality, privacy, and the certain satisfactions of pride of craftsmanship for something abstrusely defined as the social ethic, hence quickly became the object of sociological scrutiny (Whyte 267; 1953, 113). Of course, what this respectively intimates is the extent to which ubiquitous reproaches about mass-production, standardisation and conformity - developed and refined by contemporaneous writers in the context of a broad-based intellectual resistance to the suburbs - revolved around a twentieth-

century model of the white middle-class male based, somewhat counter-intuitively, on the experience of victimisation.

Indeed, the subject of masculinity in the suburban age innately bred a stock image of the castrated male, inauspiciously coerced into a subordinate status by a mass society. For John Keats, it was most definitely the very “dull-witted” uniformity of these new suburbs, of the “familiar [boxes] on the slab, [...] each inhabited by [drones] whose age, income, problems, habits, conversation, dress, possessions [...] [were] precisely [the same]” (7), which directly contributed to the American father’s becoming an “inadequate, money-terrified neuter” (181). Instead of helping him to achieve the “rich, handsome, famous, masterful [masculinity]” initially marketed by suburbia, these “fresh air slums, [...] conceived in error, neutered in greed, [and] spreading like gangrene,” ensued to “[corrode] everything they touched,” most notably ‘Mr Drone’s’ masculine power and self-determination (Keats 181, 7). Various other social critics such as Richard E. Gordon, Katherine K. Gordon and Max Gunther, for example, correspondingly lament the fact that, by the end of the 1950s, the suburban male had in fact become “the great sad joke of our time” (28). With his life superficially “shaped by prosperity,” the successfully ‘adjusted’ suburban patriarch is thereby exposed as the internal failure he truly is; an apathetic, guilt-ridden, ulcerated eunuch, perpetually caught in the “split-level trap” between the new world order of the consumption, leisure, family-centric lifestyles of the suburbs, and the desire for a masculinity fostered by traditional frontier idealism (Gordon, Gordon, Gunther 72, 30).

In having to display alien traits that run counter to his ‘nature’ - to that “vital centre” professed as the “locus of a reinvigorated masculinity” - the suburban male unsurprisingly contracted a complex of “frustrations,” “psychoses,” and “tensions” (Cuordileone 105). The origin of these neuroses lay in this collision between the masculine instinct to control one’s own destiny, and the dubious imperative toward cooperation, community, and suburban sociability, which ultimately “bores him to death” (Cuordileone 166). Nevertheless, these packaged suburban communities still succeeded to reproduce countless packaged personalities; men who would “cooperate smoothly in large groups; [men] who [wanted] to

consume more and more; [...] [men] who were willing to be commanded, [...] to fit into the social machine without friction, [...] and whose tastes could be easily influenced and anticipated” (Fromm, 1955 107). The suburban commune, in the same manner as the larger contemporary system of economic and social organisation, required a specific caste of people - people who “[appeared] ‘happy,’ [with] no doubts, [...] no conflicts,” and who could be “guided without the use of force” (Fromm, 1955 161). Such communities “made in [this] image” of the organisation man are beneficial here, fundamentally highlighting the regulatory interaction between the nature of man and the nature of the external capitalist conditions under which he is living in the mid-twentieth century. In this particular case, the American male cannot experience himself as the “active bearer of his own powers or richness,” but only as a spiritually impoverished ‘thing,’ “always dependent on powers outside of himself, unto whom he has projected his living substance” (Fromm, 1955 127). This very dependence stems, of course, from an essential need for ‘acceptance,’ which is so characteristic of the alienated person. As Fromm suggests, “why should anyone be so grateful for acceptance unless he doubts that he is acceptable, and why should successful [men] have such doubts, if not due to the fact that [he] cannot accept [himself],” because, ultimately, “[he is] not himself” (1955 150). The extrapersonal ends of “conformity” thereby become the only “haven for having a sense of identity,” and it is this exposition of the corporatized nature of postwar suburban life in so concentrated a state that, on further close inspection, may provide the best indication of the emasculating tendencies latent in organisation life (Fromm, 1955 150).

Affectedly imprisoned in a brotherhood of compulsive conformity and struggling against the forces that stripped him of his freedom, his individuality, his will, and his soul, the primary anxiety that plagued mid-twentieth century masculinity was no doubt existential and spiritual in nature. Amid the “greatest material comfort the world has ever seen,” Herbert Gold notably defines this age of American “happy problems” as bringing “nothing but confusion and anxiety” (58). In the apparent absence of more serious internal economic and social problems, Barbara Ehrenreich similarly appraises the “problem of

problemlessness” as the caustic result of an abundant postwar society (1989 19). The model middle-class male hence becomes symbolic of what was an essentially “disappointed” and “discontented generation,” and the manner of his suburban life “says it aloud even if discreetly [his] public [face] [smiles]” (Gold 59). Indeed, the plight of the suburban male soon became a prominent theme for numerous postwar novelists, providing them with the means to explore the specific social and economic conditions that informed and created this sense of existential crisis in the politics of subjectivity. Whether it be Sloan Wilson’s *The Man in The Gray Flannel Suit* (1955), whose only true thrill in life occurred during the war, when he killed a man and had not yet succumbed to the “disconnected world [of] [...] money [making], [...] [dressing] properly, [...] raising legitimate children [and] [being] kind to one’s wife” (98); Richard Yates’ Frank Wheeler of *Revolutionary Road* (1961), another “neat and solid” corporate drone whose “lack of structural distinction” leaves him awash in a shallow bath of “adjustment [...] and togetherness” (12, 129); or else Eliot Nailles, the exemplary suburban “henpecked” husband and father of John Cheever’s *Bullet Park* (1969), whose sentimental dispossession and executive alienation consign him to “[living] a life [...] without any genuine emotion or value” (168); the growing disparity between an authentic masculine ideal and the avenues available for white, middle-class men to realise that ideal, fuelled the contentious social dynamics of the century’s major works of suburban fiction.

Regarded a spokesman for the suburban age, and with few other American writers of the twentieth-century remaining more directly or definitively associated with a narrative of the suburban middle-class, it is the “definitely commercial [...] showroom [...] quality” of John Cheever’s fiction that most certainly frames the suburbs as a perfect picture window through to the grey flannel world (100). Possessing “less dimension than a comic strip” (23), and with all their “devotions [...] rooted in stupidity and boredom” (171), his characters resolutely personify that “hollow [...] disinfected” salesroom veneer of American suburbia, wherein identity is based not so much on what one does or who one is, as much as upon the saleability of how one ‘appears’ to live (7). In his calling attention to this inevitable conflict between the demands of the corporate organisation and the dormant desires of the atomised

suburbanite in texts like *Bullet Park*, Cheever's literary brand of suburban disillusionment in effect conceives the dysfunctional dimensions of masculine dejection as being somehow derivative of suburbia's larger malady, which is rooted in the very impossibility of the imaginative "apple pie order" it represents (11).

Accordingly consumed by suburbia's "artificial structure of acceptable reality" and "stubbornly [refusing] to admit the terms by which [he] [lives]," Eliot Nailles, a commercial chemist and apparently model family man dedicated to the "intenseness of his monogamy," fittingly reprises the final endpoint of capitalism's pursuit of happiness (23). His central status as a "henpecked doormat" serves to highlight the "domesticated" ideology of the *Bullet Park* suburbs, while further underscoring the suburban subordination of what could have once been Nailles' heroic and pioneering "migratory [instinct]," into the regimented and largely "painful experience of being forced into the role of a bystander" (89-90). Ultimately "feeling himself to be a hollow man," who has been customised to recognise that "cocktails and dinner in their time and place [are] as important to the welfare of the community as the village caucus, the school board and the municipal services" (6-7), Nailles "sometimes [gets] so bored," he finds himself "struggling to rejoin the stream of things," as he is increasingly "racked by vertigo, melancholy, nausea and fitful erections" (9). Yet despite this "immutable emptiness" (61) he expectedly experiences at the hands of the social ethic, Nailles nevertheless continues to "sell himself" the uniformly "adjusted" character one is supposed to have, and the appropriate inner experiences as well as the outer appearances that go with it (65). The emasculating effects of such a "commodious and efficient" (65) existence in this numbingly materialistic setting result, then, in the outright reduction of the typical Eliot Nailles suburbanite to little more than a functional role in a faceless, corporate environment; a depersonalised civic cog who "[mows] his lawns" while the neighbours watch and think, "what a nice man [Mr Nailles] must be" (235).

Viewed together in a doppelganger narrative with Paul Hammer, the illegitimate, "maladjusted" son of a socialist kleptomaniac, and chaotic antithesis to the "happily married [...] simple life" the suburbs stand for, the two men signify halves of the overburdened

American psyche, as well as the wasteful exponents of a system severely constrictive of masculine desire (95). Like his counterpart, Hammer wants nothing more than to fit in and 'belong.' Yet amid the suburban social ethic, "one seldom saw a lonely man," and so Hammer's "bastardy [appears] a threat to organised society" (173). As a result he accredits 'belongingness' to the illusory, commercial suburban "way of life" epitomised by Nailles (52). Hammer "looks at [Nailles' wife]" and "envies men like [him]," believing that if he can just mimic the suburban ideals of nuclear home and family, he may too mount himself into the "beautiful happy picture" of the Bullet Park picture window (134). For Hammer, Nailles did not "[arrive] in Bullet Park" so much as to "have been planted and grown there" (4), but this is, of course, "untrue," as "disorder, moving vans, bank loans at high interest, tears and desperation [...] characterised most of [the residents] arrivals and departures" (5). To this end, Cheever posits a dislocation at the heart of the postwar suburban experience, exposing any organic idea(l) of the suburbs – namely, its residents desire for a share of the American 'good life' as being detached from disturbing histories of displacement and dispossession - for the utterly self-centred materialism that it is. Throughout the novel, the author in fact specifically seeks to challenge this prevailing view of suburbia as a pillar of security, stability, and social adjustment through disclosing a disturbing reality of insecurity, instability and maladjustment. Subsequently, Cheever succeeds in estranging his readers from this environment they thought they knew so well, by means of stressing that essentially inescapable hammer and nail bond between affluence and abjection.

However, more than mere "comedies of suburban manners" or "didactic essays on the 'dystopian' aspects of suburbia," such works by Cheever adopt this elusive dream of 1960s American suburbanisation so as to foreground the psychological and cultural construction of suburbia as a theoretical ideal, revealing in the process the "consequent tensions that underlie the suburban experience" (Beuka 15). *Bullet Park* is, to all intents and purposes, Cheever's first genuinely existential novel, because it not only treats the moral dislocations of the second half of the twentieth century, but also directly addresses the fractured principles of America's traditional values and beliefs. It is important to recognise,

therefore, that while in many ways the new suburban landscape certainly disrupted traditional national conceptions of American manhood, it also equally resembled the principal nature of such conceptions. Indeed, given the tendency to define masculinity as synonymous with power and the physical exhibition of that power, it remains a construct that is demonstrated for other men's approval. With masculine worth always reliant on external authorisation - on an essentially 'groupist' ethos - suburban masculinity evolves, then, merely as another manifestation of a hegemonic masculine ideology grounded in surface performances defined by cultural ideals. By way of considering this late sixties text by Cheever as such, the rest of this chapter will hence proceed to examine both Nailles and then Hammer, so as to explore in what ways, and to what extent, the author's portrayal of a disenchanted suburban ennui in *Bullet Park* treads the fault lines of laissez-faire capitalism, whilst furthermore succeeding in uncovering the sources of masculine dissatisfaction in their more true and underground origins.

The overall structure of the novel is divided into three parts. Part One deals with the shrink-wrapped life of socialite suburbanite Eliot Nailles and the standardised formulation of his "rigid," yet essentially apathetic "sense of social fitness" (52). Part Two, on the other hand, offers an internalised "insight into how lonely and horny mankind is" through its more detailed account of Paul Hammer's neurotic mind, as well as the various sources of his masculine discontent (133). Though they occasionally run into one another in the first two parts of the novel – along with their numerous other disaffected *Bullet Park* neighbours – it is in Part Three that their dual narratives ceremoniously coincide. Respectively "bound together" in this antagonist structural 'doubling' between stereotypical middle-class conformity and anomic non-conformity, the two men and their split narratives significantly evoke a sense of division to which the individual mind in conflict with itself is susceptible (19). As Paul Coates suggests, "the double" exists in literature due to our "inchoate knowledge that we are incomplete and that we cannot master ourselves" (18). Moreover, it implies that identity is a "false category," for if two men are comparable, or in a simplified "Hammer and Nailles; side by side" (*BP* 19) relationship, neither has a "unique, well-defined

identity of his own” (Coates 18-19). Compelled to fulfil the life trajectory that society deems “honest, reliable, clean and happy” (*BP* 53), and with excessive emphasis thereby placed on social stability, domestic harmony, and corporate responsibility, the fractured perspective of Hammer and Nailles – two neighbouring men who were “the same weight, height and age” (*BP* 230) – alludes then to the male suburbanite’s inability to maintain a “balanced” or “united view” within this contemporary homogenous culture, which inevitably produces self-estrangement and “personal disintegration” (Coates 19). Thus, whereas select critics such as Benjamin DeMott have dismissed Cheever’s “flawed novelistic structure” as nothing else but a “broken-backed,” unconvincingly “tacked together” attempt to “[stretch] a short story into a novel” (40), it seems far fairer to argue that, through this very three-part configuration, the author in fact succeeds in creating an allegorical format in which the suburban male emerges as a locus of contradictions in a reality of conflicting discourses and discursive practices, with “the setting in some way at the heart of the matter” (*BP* 3).

Outwardly obliging and sociable inasmuch as he sees ‘utility’ in “[manufacturing] and merchandising” the spirit of community, the novel’s opening elucidation of Nailles and his character’s mandatory sense of “responsibility to [...] the [social] fitness of things,” can be read, then, as first of all documenting performance in the known and perceptible surface world of suburbia (100, 27). Despite the “utter artificiality of [his] sentiments” (33), the perpetual need to “[work] out a reasonable and patient character like a character in a play,” and then to try and “act the part,” underscores this faithful suburbanite’s excessive sensitivity, if not “self-conscious” anxiety, over the opinions and attitudes of his neighbours (114). Such dread of disapproval, moreover, corroborates the tormented social subjectivity that was particularly pertinent in the postwar American suburb; for with its more fluid social mobilities and pervasive topographical connotations of economic success and individual achievement, the loss of suburban status becomes all the more fearful, while the imperative to ‘belong’ and get along with others grows even more profound. For Nailles, any successful suburbanisation, as such, depends, then, not upon his winning mastery of the physical environment as it had done for those in the nineteenth century, but upon the culturally

promulgated need to gain the approval of other individuals; that is, upon his “winning friends and influencing people” (Potter 52). Any autonomous beliefs or principled “disdain for shifts in public opinion” respectively exist in such a situation as “liabilities rather than assets” (Potter 52) and so, whether “phony or not,” men like Nailles have to adjust themselves to “observe the rules of the game” (*BP* 116).

It is, of course, important to appreciate from the outset the extent to which Nailles, and his innate “belief in the fitness of things” (27), is directly synonymous with the precepts of his culture, so much so that any individual agency or autonomous characterisation effectively evaporates into a generic classification. Cheever’s protagonist, that is to say, represents a *type*, or else the personification of a behavioural system whereby the individual is indistinguishable from his social role. Nailles’ narrative is, in this sense, so deliberately devoid of any clear sense of personality or plot other than suburban conformity, that the succeeding discussion of his opening section almost exclusively parallels the leading critical literature on American masculinity in suburbia at the time. Indeed, by the 1960s, “social mutation” of cultural patterns and personality norms had become both “rapid and violent,” with American values increasingly “relative rather than absolute” (Potter 53). Taking his social ‘cues’ from others – peers, bosses, teachers, advertisers – Nailles thus essentially embodies this new characterological adjustment, whereby the individual “no longer follows the dictates of conscience,” but, instead, becomes highly responsive to the “fluctuations and crosscurrents of the day-to-day,” as well as to the passing standards of any group with which he is immediately associated (Potter 54). In other words, Nailles deliberately discounts the “wilderness of the human spirit” (*BP* 5) in favour of the approbation of his suburban community, and proceeds to externally manipulate his entire “way of life” (52) just so he can measure up to the inordinate “display of elegance [and] friendly talk [of those] well-dressed men and women” around him (238). Such socialised behaviour, in which his contemporaries are a constant source of guidance, highlights the extent to which the psychic degradation of the individual male takes place not only in and through his work but, Harold Rosenberg argues, “by means of his participation in any form, public or private, of social life, from

church going, to cocktail parties, to his relations with his wife and children” (322). This emphasis on the externally controlled male psyche, in turn, aptly correlates Nailles with David Riesman’s astute portrait of the ‘other-directed’ personality type. A “shallower [...] friendlier” person, who is “freer with his money [and] more uncertain of himself and his values,” Riesman coined this term “other-directed to describe white-collar men of the fifties (1950 19). In stark contrast to the “highly individualised” ‘inner-directed’ masculinity of the previous century (Riesman, 1950 15) - whose self-assured sense of self drove him as he ventured into unexplored frontiers – Nailles thereby symbolises the kind of “marketer, [...] middle-class male child” masculinity which, “[presenting] [itself] with the air of [a] [salesman] pointing out the merits of a new car in a showroom,” was understood as developing in contemporary, bureaucratic America (*BP* 100).

Furthermore, as can be seen from the “sumptuary sameness” (86) of the Bullet Park businessmen who rode the “train into the city” and “home to supper” (61), this intramural mode represents the officious method for “insuring [...] tolerance, passivity [and] conformity” amongst middle-class men, by means of sensitizing them to “systemically question themselves in anticipation of the questions of others” (Riesman, 1950 20, 256). An indiscernibly “plain man dressed plainly in grey” (*BP* 171), Nailles’ claim to “rectitude and uniformity” (239) is, therefore, indicative of what Fromm identifies as a contemporaneous “escape from freedom” (Fromm, 1941 116). According to Fromm, human beings naturally tend to fear freedom and the terrifying sense of powerlessness and ambiguity that it inspires in the individual. Hence, when acting independently in a democratic American society and confronted with the existential anguish of making choices and exercising responsibility, Nailles adopts a new “herd” mentality, in which any “gratification” or “sense of identity” depends on his acting in line with the “requirements of the culture” (Fromm, 1941 61, 77). This “painful attitude of disinterest” (*BP* 24) regarding his freedom, in effect, undercuts the stern Protestant ethic that maintained individuality for the nineteenth-century ‘inner-directed’ man, with Nailles’ other-directed inclination set rather toward “[saying] nothing,” and repeatedly “[saying] nothing” throughout the novel so as to escape the burdens of

freedom by surrendering to the external authority of the social ethic (*BP* 95, 234; exact quote repeated on both pages). Indeed, attuned to others but never to himself, such capitulation through “compulsive conforming” (Fromm, 1941 19) allows Nailles to hide in a hierarchy within which his place and his role seem certain, and to withhold the “agony, confusion and humiliation,” all those “symptoms of panic” (*BP* 123) freedom effects, by paradoxically “frustrating [all] other urges” and fusing himself with the “lonely crowd,” wherein he is ultimately “imprisoned [by] brotherhood” (Riesman, 1950 3). Thus, when he claims, “what I wear, what I eat, my sex life and a lot of my thinking is pretty well regimented but there are times when I like being told what to do,” he exhibits an essentially conventionalised, if not contrived desire which applies extensively to all the intimate areas of his life, for the order and certainty authoritarianism offers; because “[he] can’t figure out what’s right and what’s wrong in every situation” (*BP* 67).

Though he may be “willing to say what he likes,” Nailles certainly cannot believe in himself enough to “know what he wants” (Riesman, 1950 196), and hence his capacity for any “lively lights [or] vitals” is, by social habit, efficaciously “eviscerated” (*BP* 7). The “moderate, calm, a little bored and absentminded” character in the interest of which Nailles acts, in this regard, verifies the prototypical, ‘other-directed’ social ‘self’ of suburbia (126); a self which does not perform “of [its] own volition” (217), but is essentially constituted by the part the modern male is supposed to play, “the [role] written for [him]” (34) by the social ethic and which, in reality, is simply a “subjective disguise for the objective social function of man” in a given society (Fromm, 1941 101). Subsequently lacking a feeling of selfhood, Nailles is aware of himself, then, only in these alienating terms of a response to the precedence of others, and fails to “understand his own experience” or “gauge his own fate” but by locating himself within the “trends of his epoch” and the “life-chances of all the individuals of his social layer” (Mills xx). Indeed, absent from any “psychological gyroscope,” the other-directed Nailles is left with only highly attuned “social radar” through which to detect the styles and hollow ostentations of others whom he can then compulsively emulate (Riesman 16). The term ‘other-directed’ itself notably suggest such “shallowness

and superficiality,” with direction “coming from the outside” and simply being “internalised” (Riesman, 1950 159). Nailles’ “principal occupation with the merchandising of Spang,” a commercial mouthwash, as being “[reflective] of his dignity,” no doubt then serves to give credence to this claim (*BP* 103).

According to Nailles, “bad breath was a human infirmity like obeseness and melancholy, [...] [which] came between young lovers, friends, husbands and wives. [It] could lead to divorce, alimony and custody suits, [or] sap a man’s self-esteem, posture and appearance” (104). His central concern with “[curing] it,” so as to save the “victim who would mumble into his shirt, hoping to divert the fumes downward,” is, as such, based on Spang’s possible surface result, that is, on how the recipient social ‘other’ would receive and respond to it, as opposed to how the individual sufferer may directly experience it (104). This externally oriented, people-minded process is, of course, principally ‘other-directed,’ however, the belief that the “sales of Spang would increase if its taste was more unpleasant,” furthermore suggests the disturbingly synthetic preoccupations of this suburban community (105). Sure enough, with its patent connotations of cosmetic pain and torturous intrusion, the analogous metaphoric reference to a “dentist [turning] on the light above his drills” (193), or “preparing utensils for an extraction” (198), embellishes the notion of exterior “cleanliness” being associated here with an uncomfortable, interior “bitterness” (105). Nailles’ foremost “anger” and “unease” toward any “obscene [...] intimate [...] human allusions” (21), be it “[stains] [...] domestic rubbish,” or the “faint unfreshness of humanity [...] exhaled [...] at the end of the day” (79), similarly figures this suburban environment as an artificial “precinct of disinfected acoustics” (9), one so inauthentically “crude, flagrant and repulsive that it [amounts] to an irony” (124). Indeed, with the somewhat hostile veneer of ‘success’ very much to be desired, and in many cases favoured to any human substance, anything remotely “vagrant” from Nailles’ rigid and sanitised “sense of the fitness of things,” proceeds to directly “[offend] his nose [and] his sight” (86), until all that is left is “nothing, nothing, nothing at all except the blandness of the scene,” which, after a while, would get “so [boring],” it itself would “be offensive” (238).

Cheever further explicates this notion through his repeated reference to “wax flowers,” which serve as a subtle symbol for the beautifully preserved and polished, pristine world of suburbia, at the same time as a demonstrative indication of its inert and imitational, commoditised nature (26). Notably for Nailles, “wax flowers meant death” (130), and in view of the fact that he only ever “dreamed” of “his own [...] funeral” (57) – as if he were dead already – corroborates the contrived conservation of this style of life as derivative of the deadening, “no good for anything” materialism that governs affluent middle-class American society (88). Consistently “weighted down with rugs and chairs” (32) and “[tables] set [with] wax flowers” (12), Cheever in effect allegorises the suburban locale as a pale imitation of the ‘real thing,’ a counterfeit community where nature itself is subsumed under zoning considerations and becomes merely another element of maintaining visual evidence of dominant class status. The direct parallel made between the customary household “display of wax flowers” (130) and the male “principal member” being described as a “discouraged and unwatered flower” (30), likewise, suggests a sense of alienation from nature occasioned by the commodification of the suburban environment, as well as disclosing the essentially barren and castrating atmosphere of this sterile environment, which ensued to “transform the organic into the inorganic” so as to render all “living persons [into] things [which] can be controlled and ordered” (Fromm, 1973 41).

Nailles, like his suburban others, is therefore a mere function of society; a sedated “doll” whose “procreative usefulness was over” (*BP* 26, 101), and which the repressive dictates of organisational culture liked to “dress [and] undress,” to “have [arranged]” and to “talk with” in the knowledge “he can’t answer” (26). Certainly amid these contemporary postwar conditions, the resolve to externally ‘keep up appearances’ usurps the internal struggle for existence every time, thereby generating a sort of ‘false consciousness’ in which “falsehood, confinement, exclusion and a kind of blindness [seem] to be [the] only means of comprehension” (*BP* 33). As Mills explains, “in dressing people up and changing the scenery of their lives,” the exclusive suburban experience effectively cultivated a “great faith in the religion of appearance” (169). Just like a “masquerade party,” all Cheever’s

suburbanites have to really do, therefore, is to “get [their] clothes at Brooks, catch the train and show up in church once a week and no one will ever ask a question about [their] identity” (*BP* 54). For above all else, these suburbanites who “look like people and yet they’re really not” (*BP* 26), exemplify “a new cast of actors performing the major routines of twentieth-century society” (Mills ix). Of course, within the narcissistically immersive “commercial centre” that is Bullet Park, this ‘performance’ principally involves the acquisition of appropriate props, for if you “don’t have a pool [yourself], frankly its something of a limitation” (*BP* 5, 13).

Not wanting to find themselves “left out of the conversation [...] when people start talking about pool chemicals and so forth” (*BP* 13), Cheever’s characters consistently maintain a position of superiority in what Pierre Bourdieu calls the “culture game” (1984 1). According to Bourdieu, there exists at the centre of affluent American life an “economy of cultural goods” that function in accordance with a “specific logic” (1984 1). One’s “place” in the social landscape is dictated, as such, by their ability to demonstrate possession of discriminating tastes and propriety, or what Bourdieu refers to as “cultural capital” (1984 1). Following this contention, Cheever presents the “well-bred, beautiful, wealthy” citizens of Bullet Park as subject to the ‘symbolic ecology’ of suburbia, in which evidentiary display of cultural distinction through inconspicuous consumption serves not only as the surveyor of social status, but as a measure of individual worth (*BP* 55).¹³ Certainly Nailles’ sense of his own significance is frequently experienced by means of socio-economic factors extraneous to himself, as if his life in suburbia rests solely on some “substructure of talismans” which determine human value as the market determines the price of a commodity (241). “[Substituting] possessions for moral and spiritual norms” (44), he thereby signifies his social standing through the valorisation of property ownership as a nexus of individual social power, and, in so doing, gives way to an almost exclusive reference to the conceptual qualities of his assets; all the while neglecting to relate himself to their actual concreteness or

¹³ Albert Hunter defines the “symbolic ecology” of a particular landscape as the collection of “processes by which symbolic meanings of environment [are] developed” (199).

uniqueness. The allegorical reference to Nailles' house being "made of cards" effectually substantiates this idea, by way of alluding to his home in the idiom of a game, and so factoring its worth in the same tenuous terms as a card's figurative value within a card game (46). Amidst this vain "game of culture" (Bourdieu, 1984 3), the material reality of any object to which Nailles can relate with the reality of his own person is, therefore, exchanged for what Fromm describes as the "phenomenon of abstractification" (1955 61).

When "[relating] oneself to an object in an abstract way," namely, "emphasizing only those qualities which it has in common with all other objects of the same genus," Fromm argues that objects can only ever be "experienced as commodities," that is, "as [embodiments] of exchange value" (1955 61, 112). Thus, when the citizens of Bullet Park repeatedly refer their neighbour's house according to its "estimated resale price" (*BP* 6), they are not centrally concerned with its use as a home, that is to say, "with its concrete qualities," but are speaking of it only in other-directed terms as a relative product, the main quality of which is its exchange value (Fromm, 1955 111). Indeed, with Cheever's suburban population conditioned to prioritise the abstract form of "the Howestons (7 bedrooms, 5 baths, \$65,000) and the Welchers (3 bedrooms, 1 ½ baths, \$31,000)" (*BP* 9) – that being the "specific logic [of] cultural capital" to which Bourdieu refers (1984 1) – they demonstrate a receptive marketing orientation whereby they must respond to the given object even if it "poorly serves their actual needs" (Whyte 324), since suburbanites are supposed to "[live] in such places" (*BP* 13). Within the socio-economic structure of suburbia, money itself becomes, then, secondary. As Karl Marx explains, "money" works only inasmuch as it "transforms real human and natural powers into [...] abstract ideas, and [...] imperfections and imaginings, the powers which only exist in the imagination of the individual, into real powers" (Marx 300-1).¹⁴ Chiefly acquisitive for the 'good life,' Nailles' consumerism is, therefore, essentially the "satisfaction of artificially stimulated phantasies" (Fromm, 1955 130); a phantasy "extension of [affairs]" (*BP* 201), which are principally alienated from any

¹⁴ Karl Marx, "Nationalökonomie und Philosophie" (1844). *Die Frühschriften*, Alfred Kröner Verlag, Stuttgart, 1953, pp. 300, 301 (Translation by Erich Fromm, *Sane Society*, pp. 128).

standard of personal experience, and whose reality is mainly the fiction the advertising campaign has created, “like the ‘healthy’ dental paste,” or, in this case, mouthwash (Fromm, 1955 61). Rather than an effective means to an end, the social pressure to excessively consume hence comes to be the aim in itself; specifically, an irresponsibly displaced pursuit of happiness in which the materialistic “suburban rhythm” of a newly affluent America obeys the profitable investment pattern of capital (Whyte 316).

With a “consciousness stuffed with portables, virtue incarnate in cretonne and evil represented by rep,” Nailles consequently presages that suburban obligation to recurrently validate one’s respectability by means of material well-being (*BP* 32). It is, however, important to distinguish the fact that, given everyone in suburbia “lives in an identical house,” the most prominent item of one’s estate is deemed mandatory and so “washed out” as a determining factor (Whyte 314). It is, instead, the proficient “presenting [of one’s] living room, [...] [one’s] table, [...] [one’s] rug” (*BP* 95), namely the showcasing of continually upgraded, marginal household purchases which becomes paramount in maintaining appearances and ascertaining one’s worth as a suburbanite; while non-possession of that which has been classified a necessity by resident trends is equated to an almost unsocial act; “an unspoken aspersion of the other’s judgement or taste” (Whyte 314). For Roger Silverstone, the postwar suburban home was most certainly one “of and for display” (7), with self-reflexive acts of status seeking and ‘belonging’ inevitably entwined with interior “display” and the “aspiration of consumer goods” (110). In his words, the essentially “ersatz venue” of suburban domesticity, complete with its own “approval insurance” fixtures, had become a contrived “picture window” designed precisely for “seeing and being seen” (Silverstone 110, 11). Markedly, the key within this other-directed environment was nevertheless to be seen as to not stand out, for its residents to be overwhelming “lively” in their commodities, yet apparently “hollow” in their selves (*BP* 7). The innocuous architectural layout of Nailles’ house, “one of those [white] rectilinear Dutch Colonials with a pair of columns at the door and an interior layout so seldom varied that one could, standing in the hallway with its curved staircase, correctly guess the disposition of

every stick of furniture” (21), in this respect, indicates the extent to which these mass-produced suburban homes were customarily decorated in keeping with conformist ideologies which, in turn, ensured specific parts of everyday family life were seen in a specific way, whilst other elements were not seen at all. Cheever presents the stylistic sameness of Nailles’ consumerised home as well as the Bullet Park neighbourhood itself, that is, in response to the new “vulnerability and permeability of the private sphere” in modern America, as a domestic “theatre [or] stage on which to play out a set of bourgeois social conventions” (Silverstone 11, 219).

To this end, Elaine Tyler May’s definition of the postwar suburban home as a “secure, private nest removed from the dangers of the outside world” is rendered somewhat problematic, for what May understands to be the ideal version of the “American home,” namely a domestic “bastion of safety in an insecure world,” has from the outset been but an abstract stage on which a drama of perfect nuclear family life should ideally be played out (9). Nonetheless, it seems still necessary to acknowledge the suburban autonomy May describes, specifically its complacent contentment with itself, as an allegorical expression for the situation of postwar America in Cheever’s work, as well as in the outside world as a whole. As Fredric Jameson explains, to shift from the “realities” of a period such as the 1960s, to the “representation” of that rather different thing, the ‘sixties,’ obligates us in addition to underscore the “cultural sources of all attributes with which we have endowed the period,” many of which seem very precisely to derive from “its own representation of itself” (281). The both intensely personal (“inside people’s home and heads”) and extensively abstract (“pervading the planet”) (Silverstone 182) image-saturated space of Cheever’s *Bullet Park* therefore seeks to highlight that normatively held “happy picture [...] of a man and a woman and two children” – used suggestively here to “[advertise] cameras” (*BP* 134) - which not only was a “staple of the [...] sitcoms of the 1950s,” but indeed of postwar American culture’s homogenous “vision of suburbia” (Beuka 108). In this way, Cheever denotes the extent to which that over determined “sense of permanence” (*BP* 181), so characteristic of suburban representation, expresses a cultural tendency to misread and

misremember the suburbs, a tendency which suggests a fundamental desire “to be immortal” (69); to stand outside of history and either seek refuge from one’s own past, as evident in Hammer’s declaration that “this might be the environment where [he] could begin [his] new life,” or to capture an idealised past “separated [...] from the chaos and change” of the present (212). This commodification of history, or “nostalgia for the present” if you will (Jameson 279), moreover, allows Cheever to offer a “corrective vision” to those mass cultural representations of congenial community and “stable patriarchal domesticity” (Beuka 107-8) - namely those comforting, codified narratives of the suburbs in the era’s image of itself - which were so simplistically, and yet forcefully promulgated in an attempt to dissociate the postwar American present from sites of conflict and trauma; as if “nothing bad has ever or will ever happen here” (*BP* 186).

As already mentioned, buying into the suburban dream - into the “gratifications of the new car, the TV dinner and your favourite programme on the sofa” (Jameson 280) - was, certainly for many people, the purchasing of not just a home, but also an entire way of life. Those being inducted into the ranks of middle-class home ownership hence rarely strayed from the predictable standards exhibited on “American magazine [...] covers,” which were heavily tinged with aspired-to and dreamed-of features so as to conceptualise domestic life as a kind of stage “paved for [one’s] contentment” (*BP* 217, 188). The lure of such images, explicitly the ecstatically enslaving prospect of becoming transformed by them, subsequently necessitated family life in suburbia to consist almost entirely of scheduled play. As Arthur Kroker expounds, the suburban inhabitant like Nailles personified the “simulacra dwelling” where “living means real, imitation life” (Kroker 213). Hannah Arendt similarly intimates how the political realities of the US were so “well hidden by the surface of [this] society,” whose public relations multiplied all social factors as a “mirror multiplies light,” that the “glaring façade” soon appeared to be the “overwhelming reality” (46). The “growing, growing” landscape of Bullet Park, which “[showed] great improvement, every day in every way” (*BP* 10), becomes, therefore, “less a lived place” than an opaque “signifier of certain co-optive impulses” that linger beneath the fabric of mainstream middle-class American

culture (Beuka 14). The Nailles family, likewise, are rendered mere animate significations, with Eliot, the benign suburban patriarch, nevertheless “grateful to be able to play out this much of [a] role,” for amidst an essentially superficial environment staged to resemble an idealised media image, the constant audience and spectacle soon became “[his] only filial opportunity” (*BP* 28).

It is, of course, precisely this impervious ‘mirrored’ premise for the suburban landscape which is shown to then respectively distort Nailles’ masculinity and his larger sense of identity, for in order to best “imitate” this “way [of life],” he has to be “born again,” to be quite detached from, and ignorant of, any ominous histories of displacement or dispossession (Kroker 213). The notable absence of any rudimentary explanation regarding Eliot Nailles’ past, that is to say, his narrative’s clear disregard for any account of his personal history, serves to juxtapose his character against the cultural presumption that the postwar suburbs were rootless and “free of trouble” (*BP* 186), by way of presenting him as having been “grown there [in] Bullet Park” (4). Cast, consequently, as the “colonial subject” of suburbia, Nailles is “tied umbilically to the television, the mall, the lawn,” to a way of life that “grows on [him], feeds on [him], parasites [him]” (Kroker 214), with the aim of turning him into something “repulsively unlike his nature” (*BP* 239); into a man Robert Wood describes as being, “without direction or ambition except for his desire for a certain portion of material security,” a man “so conscious of his fellows that he has no convictions of his own,” a man, in other words, who belongs there (Wood 3). With this, the “quite literal promise” that “if [you] could only possess this [life] [you] would be [yourself] [...] industrious and decent” (*BP* 168, 185), that individuals could, indeed, finally realise their deepest desires here, in a zone of supposed security and comfort, is essentially subverted. Cheever intimates, instead, that by the very anaesthetising nature of its physical space, the suburban reality was for all genuine expressions of desire to not just be blocked, but uprooted in their very conception.

In this sense, the foregoing discussion of the process of abstraction extends “far beyond the realm of objects,” with the people of Bullet Park experienced, too, as the

personification of a “quantitative exchange value” (Fromm, 1955 113). What this means is that the “[commercially] handsome” personality package of suburbia becomes an instrument for capitalist purposes, whilst sentiments serve as mere “hallowed” tokens by which societal status is obtained (*BP* 100). Removed from the inner feelings they supposedly express, Nailles’ relationship with his fellow man hence becomes like one between two abstractions; a superficial interaction to which there was “less dimension than a comic strip” (25). If he were to attempt “to glimpse the soul of a man” (157) in this manner, he would find nothing in turn but distance and indifference, and certainly no insight into “what the pathos of [man] [is],” or “why [...] they [may] seem forsaken, poleaxed and lost” (61). Indeed, despite his investment in the personality market of the culture game, Nailles is markedly aware that his “society had become [...] automative and nomadic,” with “means of communication [being] established by the use of [...] suitable signals” (21). Nevertheless, consisting of the correct commodities, appropriate apparel and proper participation in social activities, these essentially empty signifiers deemed “suitable” continue to formulate a “prized image of self” which permits Nailles to cling to the false consciousness of his status position (Mills 258). The extent to which Nailles is correspondingly intended as the poster-boy for suburbia is made clear when Paul Hammer finds a “photograph and a brief article about his promotion to head of the Mouthwash Division at Saffron” (145), which convinces Hammer “whoever lived there,” in Bullet Park, “lived a useful and illustrious life” (179). Certainly as a “member of the Bullet Park Volunteer Fire Department and the Gorey Brook Country Club” (45), Nailles offers an engaging image of suburban success, however, the fact that this ubiquitous surface image of “exceptional innocence and purity” is the principal portrait we have of Nailles’ character, even with his first person narrative voice, suggests the degree to which he is wholly trapped by his public persona (198).

The use of rhetorical questions across the novel’s opening section no doubt serves, then, as an astute literary indication of Nailles’ cumulative vacancy and self-estrangement. Having acquired an organisational, outward numbness, Nailles has grown equally out of touch with his internal self, and while he may be experiencing a feeling, he is incapable of

identifying neither “what” it is nor “why” he is feeling it (61). With “no counsel, advice, censure, experience or any other [...] qualities to bring” (87), Nailles is fundamentally disconnected from any emotional expressiveness, and so fails to discernably empathise with “why [this] man [is] crying,” or “why [his] neighbour is crying,” or whether “it is his [own] turn to cry” (136). This abstractly disorientating “force of separateness” (*BP* 128) is innately symptomatic of a contemporary American male malaise, or what Roger Horrocks loosely terms “male autism” (Horrocks 107). For Horrocks, the autistic male is “deeply ashamed” of himself, of feeling “vulnerable” or “enthusiastic” over anything since it threatens his self-control (107). It is, of course, Nailles’ ceremonial duty to the social ethic of suburbia that produces such shame, as it obliges him to favour self-respectability over self-respect, and to categorically “[restrain] himself” from any natural “impulse [...] to embrace [...] his son” (*BP* 87). As a substitute, Nailles is reduced to then just “[having] a drink and [looking] at the television,” since “there [isn’t] anything else to do” (118).

So as to manage the “[profound] loneliness” which logically accompanies such repression, Nailles therefore adopts an “outer deadness” (Horrocks 107) by means of removing himself from true experience, and masking the “black [abyss] at the edge of everything” with the repeated use of a “massive tranquilizer” (*BP* 128, 121). Cheever’s allusion to drug addiction here is allegorically indicative of suburbia’s larger capitalistic dependencies, which, both “mercenary and dishonest,” made “any reflection – any sort of thoughtfulness or emotional depth – impossible” (167). Needless to say, Nailles is so completely invested in the social system of suburbia that, “just like a drug addict [dependent] on his drug” (Fromm, 1955 155), he renounces any experience of his self as an autonomous entity with “any genuine emotion or value,” or as anything more than a saleable commodity reliant on the external approval of others (*BP* 168). Even though consciously trapped in this “position that [seems] desperate and abject” (61), Nailles cannot fathom a life beyond the “rosy nimbus” (121) of his “white house and his office” (65), and hence he becomes but this “frail, wizened, [...] shade of himself” (90), who “[knows] he [has] to get a new prescription before he [does] anything else” (124). In an effort to pretend that “[everything] was the way

it was when it was so wonderful” (59), and satisfy that elemental ‘nostalgia for the present,’ Nailles thereby utilises the apathetic “guise of forgetfulness” (176) through quite literally “drugging [himself]” (168). Whilst this may evidently prevent any sense of a specifically masculine “valour” from ever being seen or effectively realised, if Nailles were to even begin to discover the despairing depths of his deprivation, that is to say, “why [he is] so disappointed, [...] why everything [seems] to have passed [him] by [...] why [...] there [is] no brilliance or promise in [his] affairs” (134) despite the fact “[he] tried, [and] tried, [and] did the best [he] knew how to,” it would surely lead to a great crisis (10).

In consequence, other than that his “sense of being alive was to bridge or link the disparate environments and rhythms of his world,” we are purposely denied any full or immediate access to Nailles’ emotional state (65). In order to gain a frank insight into what happens to the male psyche when “one of [those] principle bridges [...] collapses” (65), we have to hence look to the other side of the tracks from middle-class conformity, specifically to the “maladjusted [...] parasite” that is Paul Hammer (207). Introduced as both bachelor and bastard “at a time when the regard for domesticity had gotten so intense,” Hammer is constitutionally inept in his adjustment to the commercially normative, socio-psychological fit of sixties suburbia, whereby one “appeared [...] perforce with one’s wife [and] one’s children” (145). Supposedly too unstable to fulfil this life trajectory deemed “clean and happy” (53), and with no room in contemporary America for what Ehrenreich dubs “the mature bachelor” (1983 14), Hammer is considered to be a “threat to organised society” (*BP* 173); a “pervert [...] with severe emotional problems” (Ehrenreich, 1983 14), whose “best defence,” or else his “only defence” against the “cruel injustice [...] [of] illegitimacy” (*BP* 163), was to incessantly “[prey] on the happiness of others” (207). Accordingly, Scott Donaldson insists that, if Nailles is the passive “preserver of family and community,” then Hammer represents the otherwise “obsessed and deranged destroyer” (243). It is important to realise, however, that whilst there is certainly justification in Donaldson’s determination of Hammer and Nailles as respective “fragments of a single divided psyche,” he critically undercuts this contention by claiming that, “hate rules [Hammer’s] existence as love

dominates that of Nailles’” (Donaldson 247). Indeed, whereas Donaldson maintains that Nailles is fundamentally “content with his lot,” it would be far sounder to argue that, in fact, Hammer emerges half way through the novel as the anomic by-product of the “grey miasma of conformity that gripped [...] men” like Nailles, and beneath the surface of which there had always resided a latent residue of inarticulate pain and masculine terror (Ehrenreich, 1983 44).

It is obvious that the compulsion for conformity provides a “source of anxiety” for Nailles (*BP* 102); a continuously operating though hidden sense of insecurity, which succeeds to “[break] [his] spirit” (102) by forcing him to “put down the dreams of a strong man [...] in exchange for the anxieties of [what felt like] some decrepit octogenarian who feared that he had lost his false teeth” (90). Thus, to read “the love [Nailles] felt for his wife” - that “seemed like some limitless discharge of a clear amber fluid that would *surround* [her], *cover* [her], *preserve* [her] and leave [her] *insulated* but *visible* like the contents of an aspic” (*BP* 25; emphasis my own) – in the same way as Donaldson, namely as demonstrative of Nailles’ individual “capacity to [...] love [...] admire [and] protect,” neglects to consider the anxiously commoditised temperament of Nailles’ descriptive language which, as it happens, directly corroborates the duplicitously ‘covered,’ ‘preserved,’ ‘insular,’ and ‘visible’ surface principles of suburbia (Donaldson 246). This is made further evident when Nailles professes that it was his “manifest destiny [...] to love [his wife] Nellie” (*BP* 23), as he ensues to distort the conventional rhetoric of American imperialism within the domestic context of suburbia, so as suggest the extent to which the “hallowed institution of holy matrimony” had become the new national doctrine of success, at the same time as detracting any emotional or affectionate, spousal association (100). It is not ‘love,’ as such, that therefore governs Nailles’ existence, but rather the precarious American pursuit of suburban happiness which, with its “false teeth” like veneer (90), limits Nailles’ masculine influence to the close-up scenes of job, family and neighbourhood, whilst ultimately denying him any human capacity to either “fall in love” or to “have [...] hate” (55, 193).

As a result, given that he is initially presented as a societal outcast, Hammer's isolated version of events offers a window onto what lies outside these rigid structures of suburbia's dominant value system, that is onto the "savage and unnatural [...] appetites" which contradict the "visionary [...] summit of [Nailles'] perfection" (18). Cheever's use of doubling here is, however, less a transgression from, and more an explicit emphasis of the oppressive nature of fixed suburban male role patterns, for despite deviating from the dictates of the social ethic, Hammer is nevertheless unable to escape their emasculating impact as he begins to suffer from "a form of despair that seemed to have a tangible approach" (174). Described as a pathological "cafard [that] followed him" (182), this "profound [...] melancholy," which gave Hammer "difficulty breathing" or "getting out of bed" (219), can be seen as the affliction of a culture in which expectations for self-realisation, "shaped in part by therapeutic culture and in part by middle-class affluence," were greater than ever before (Cuordileone 138). With an "adequate income" (*BP* 174), Hammer certainly believes he is entitled to individual self-fulfilment, and hence he articulates a solipsistic "sublime feeling of rightness" (235), whereby he regards the "earth" as "[his] property," fittingly "paved" and "ready" for his "occupancy [...] [and] contentment" (183-88). But of course, this notion of individual aspiration and fulfilment is only attainable in terms of one's adjustment to society's "normal spectrum" (219), thereby fostering Hammer's sense of masculine "ridicule and despair" (174) by promoting "normative, 'mature' male role expectations" and "pathologizing" those who seek a lifestyle "outside of the conventions of the time" (Cuordileone 138). It is through the subsequent autobiographical account of Hammer's "intolerable sense of his aloneness" (*BP* 149) that the reader is able, then, to observe the actuality of "squalor, spiritual poverty and [monotonous] selfishness" (168) compressed behind the façade of Nailles' cohesive suburban selfhood, as Hammer's doppelganger narrative provides a telling example of American aspiration corrupted into a "terrible ego [centrism]" which impedes effectual integration (214). Put simply, the way in which the suppressed narrative of Part I collapses into the graphically detailed monologue of Part II depicts Hammer as a "frightening projection" of that

incomprehensible male “confusion” and “infirmity” that inevitably arise when too much emphasis is placed on suburban conformity, making it not a question of ‘love’ or ‘hate,’ but rather one of convention and abjection (178).

As Riesman portends, “in a society of any size there will be some who are pushed out of that tight web” (1950 241). Within the “aggressively hostile,” heteronormative ‘gated’ community of suburbia this is a particularly prominent phenomenon, and it is precisely Hammer’s “inability to cope with the social demands of modern [suburban] culture” (Riesman, 1950 212, 244) that respectively vilifies him with the “incriminating [...] judgement” of homosexuality (*BP* 146). Having failed to adjust to normative and mature male role requirements - which involved “attaining a respectable job, getting married, maintaining a home, and establishing a family” - Hammer is assumed to suffer from the same combination of “infantile fixation, dread of responsibility, and fear of the opposite sex” (Cuordileone 146), which supposedly compel the “deviant homosexual” into “an unnatural way of life” (*BP* 177). Hence, when visiting a psychiatrist in the hope of locating the “source of [his] cafard,” Hammer is informed that, without an adequately “efficient disposition,” he must be a “repressed transvestite homosexual,” acutely “ashamed of, [...] [and] intimidated [...] [by his] sexual guilt” (177-179). Of course, what this overtone essentially underscores is the extent to which, in postwar therapeutic culture, the male homosexual and the bachelor were condemnably equated as “fundamentally immature and maladjusted,” but unlike the bachelor, the homosexual had allegedly “given up entirely on fulfilling a normative masculine role in society” (Cuordileone 146-7). What is more, through this episode Cheever conveys the way in which contemporaneous psychiatric judgement localised the “catalyst” for male homosexuality within “external sociological factors,” as opposed to “innate biological drives,” in an attempt to rationalise the apparent increase in the incidence of homosexuality (Cuordileone 147).

The notion that male homosexuality was on the rise certainly distinguishes the sexual anxieties of this period from others before it. Nailles in point of fact states that he didn’t “dislike boys like that, [...] it’s just that they [mystified] [him], they [frightened]

[him] because [he] didn't know where they [came] [or] where they're going" (*BP* 116). Following the same line of contention, writers of the fifties such as Abram Kardiner recognised the specific social drifts and disorders of the postwar period as providing the basis for what he described as this "large-scale flight from masculinity" (164). Kardiner candidly points to the existing external circumstances of suburban affluence, particularly one's "inability to keep up with the Joneses" (Kardiner 170), as that which subsequently affected a man's ability to "prove that [he] was truthful and manly" (*BP* 177), along with his "voluntary" sex-object choice (Kardiner 170). To this end, Hammer comes to signify what was then popularly believed to be "the [man] who [is] overwhelmed by the increasing demands to fulfil the specifications of masculinity," and who has to "flee from competition because [he fears] the increased pressure on what [he] [considers] [his] very limited resources" (Kardiner 175). It is, of course, through this very prevalent view of homosexuality as a socially assimilated trait that Cheever actually succeeds in calling attention to the diminishing sense of options available to men in postwar America, for despite the growing perception of entitlement to personal freedom and self-fulfilment, the "division" between the "two forces" of natural "instinct" and social "duty" seemed to Hammer like "a broad river without bridges" (*BP* 128).

Significantly, Hammer encounters numerous potential homoerotic incidences as a "direct consequence of [his] being alone" (146), which all together suggests that, in suburbia, the only "other [way] of doing it besides being joined in holy matrimony and filling up the cradle" is to be "queer" (117). Most notably on the beach, where one was expected to appear with "one's wife, one's children, sometimes one's parents or a brace of house guests," but never as a "lonely man," Hammer meets the "amorous and slightly cross-eyed gaze" of a "comely and tanned [...] faggot" (145-146). At the same time, however, Hammer spots another man on the scene, "a conscientious desk worker with a natural stoop and a backside broadened by years of honest toil" (146). Whereas the 'faggot' "hooked his thumbs into his trunks and lowered them to show an inch or two of backside," this "honest [...] desk worker," who was "in no way muscular or comely," attempts to "fly a kite [...] with his wife

and two children” (146). No doubt Cheever is chiefly concerned here with exploiting a closely interrelated set of contradictory attitudes, which, Bernice Murphy contends, “can most clearly be expressed as a set of binary oppositions” (2009 3). The juxtaposition of these two men is, therefore, particularly interesting, for it forces Hammer to overtly declare which “world” he “[chooses] to live in,” whilst congruently accentuating the abundant lack of options available to the middle-class male beyond the dichotomous paradigm of suburban adjustment or maladjustment (*BP* 147).

For fear he be further outcast, Hammer hence dismisses the “faggot” - who “threw [him] another sidelong glance” together with an additional “absentminded pull of his trunks” – and explains that, “I got to my feet and joined the man with the kite,” at which point the “faggot sighed, hitched up his trunks and wandered off as [Hammer] intended that he should” (147). In this respect, the “filament of kite line” proves to be an important metaphor inasmuch as it “succinctly declares [Hammer’s] intentions to the faggot,” as if to “possess some extraordinary moral force” (147). Sure enough, as Hammer “helped to unsnarl the line” it unfolds into a symbolic boundary marker of community, albeit one, like the garden gate, which is inherently permeable (147). Hammer quickly realises as such, that there is little, if nothing more than this synthetically “fine [...] line” (147) to separate suburban ‘normality’ from the “baser qualities” that lurk “under the [...] brilliant [...] grass [...] and fir trees” (58), and that the standardised “two-car family” (53) kind of existence he has not much choice but to try to emulate is essentially “bound together by just such a length of string – cheap and colourless” (147). Markedly, when Hammer does eventually marry his wife Marietta, he similarly identifies her as “always [wearing] a white thread on her clothing” (204). He alleges that, “even if [he] bought her a mink coat there would be a white thread on it,” and it is this very “white thread,” in the same manner as the kite string, that holds “some mysterious power as if it were a catalyst that clarified [Hammer’s] susceptibilities” (205). Of course, the fact that Hammer nevertheless still “longed for a moral creation whose mandates were heftier than the delight of children, the trusting smiles of

strangers and a length of string,” confirms the fragility of newly established suburban identities, as well as the visionary vacuousness upon which their verities are founded (147).

It is, therefore, important to note the way in which, following this scene, Hammer comes to appreciate the “hopeful gaze of a faggot on the make” (181) as that of “all lonely men” (217), who have been “driven by the sameness of [their environment] to authenticate [their] identity by unnatural sexual practices” (181). The fact that Hammer refuses to acknowledge this ‘gaze,’ purposefully “[lowering] [his] eyes chastely to the floor” (181), furthermore reiterates just how hard it is for the individual male suburbanite, even at the expense of his own “honor, passion, [...] intelligence, [and] [genuineness],” to justify to himself a departure from the social norm (26). The “[serious] [...] doubt” (202) Hammer expresses over the tenuous tenets of suburban normality even as he “[retires] in defeat” (102), in this regard, corroborates the “fractured personality” of the male suburbanite who was perpetually torn, as Cheever’s novel is divided between the “paradoxical comforts and perils of conformity” (Murphy, 2009 4). Indeed, whereas Nailles is firmly indoctrinated in the togetherness ethos of suburbia, to the extent that he associates conformism with the security and certainty of ‘belonging,’ Hammer cannot help interpreting the cultural lack of “uniqueness” as “seriously threatening to [his] own uniqueness” (181). With nothing in the homogenously tepid, artificial landscape of Bullet Park to “distinguish it from a hundred, hundred others” (181), Hammer fears there “might be nothing about [him]” (181), that is to say, nothing “true to life” (30) left in him to “set [him] apart from other men” (181). This leads us, then, back to this idea of identity as a “false category,” and Cheever’s narrative employment of the doppelganger as a means to underscore the breakdown of any “well defined [male] identity” in contemporary American society (Coates 18).

For Gordon Slethaug, in the contemporary doppelganger text such as *Bullet Park*, the double starts to “[take] on a new identity” removed from the “universal absolutes” of an “indivisible, unified, continuous, and fixed identity,” and toward the representation of a “divided and discontinuous self in a fragmented universe” (Slethaug 3). It was the principle “mission” of the author of the double, as such, to “decentre the concept of the self,” to view

“human reality as a construct,” and to explore the “inevitable drift of signifiers away from their referents” (Slethaug 3). Rather than a division wherein “[different] characters represent opposing qualities” (Slethaug 12), the split narratives of Hammer and Nailles - apportioned like “spaghetti and meatballs, salt and pepper, oil and vinegar, Romeo and Juliet, block and tackle, thunder and lightening, bacon and eggs, [...] war and peace, heaven and hell, good and evil, life and death, love and death, death and taxes” (BP 56-7) - thereby work to “raise questions about fixed categories and constructs,” especially about the notion that any human being has a “unified identity” (Slethaug 5). Thus, what appears in Nailles’ conditioned surface account like an interrelated identity and communal ‘belonging,’ Hammer’s “intense emotional vertigo” (BP 181) no doubt purposefully serves to conclude as a “faulty first person [narrative]” (Slethaug 5), within which the then questionable basis of human perception has been caught in the culturally “monotonous [regulation] [and] dehumanisation of man” (Whyte 398).

Hammer’s neurotic fear, “not of falling but of vanishing” (Cheever 181), in this sense, critically reproaches the embittered “spiritual conformity” and personal disintegration that are the “unavoidable consequence of [organized] society” (Whyte 396). It is, however, Hammer’s subsequent desire to get “back [to] the mountains” (Cheever 60), and “back” in touch with the “most natural [of] human [conditions]” so as to “[fend] off [his] cafard” (182) and reclaim the original “excellence and beauty [he] had lost” (174), which couples this suburban disillusionment, crucially, with a much deeper false consciousness regarding American masculinity. Throughout his narrative, Hammer diagnoses the anaesthetized climate of suburbia as fatefully affronting the “[arduous] [...] natural man” of hegemonic masculine ideology (171); that is he, “the hardy man,” who according to Riesman’s study, *Individualism Reconsidered* (1954), “pioneered on the frontiers of production, exploration, and colonization” (27). Nina Baym correspondingly illuminates how this idea of an essential Americanness - and within that, an essential American manhood – expounded with the emergence of such influential mid-century works of criticism as Henry Nash Smith’s *Virgin Land* (1950) and R.W.B Lewis’ *The American Adam* (1955). According to Baym, these

works consistently maintained that, “as something artificial and secondary to human nature,” society exerts an “unmitigatedly destructive pressure on individuality” (126). They likewise narrate a confrontation of the American individual, “the pure American self divorced from specific social circumstances,” with the “promise” offered by “the idea of America” (Baym 126). Behind this promise is, of course, the assurance that “individuals come before society, that they exist in some meaningful sense prior to, and apart from, societies in which they happen to find themselves” (Baym 127).

The best prescription or *defense* against effective suburban castration, in Hammer’s mind, therefore lies in rediscovering the “[frightening] massiveness” of nature (Cheever 102), for like Michael Kimmel suggests, “if the fate of twentieth-century man is to live with death from adolescence to premature senescence, why then the only life-giving answer is to [...] live with death as immediate danger, to divorce oneself from society, [and] to set out on that uncharted territory into the rebellious imperatives of the self” (Kimmel, 1996 144). This prescription, or *promise*, is, needless to say, a “deeply romantic one,” wherein the natural landscape of America, “untrammelled by history and social accident,” purportedly permits the American individual to achieve “complete self-definition” (Baym 126). It is, thus, important to recognize the fact that, instead of physically venturing into nature, Hammer chooses to “summon those images that represented for [him] the excellence [...] that he had lost,” the first of which was “a snow-covered mountain [that] seemed to represent beauty, enthusiasm and love,” thereby demonstrating the extent to which American masculinity, in truth, consistently relies on a reservoir of mythological and romanticized images with which men sustain themselves in proving their manhood (Cheever 174-5).

In a sense, this supposed promise of America and its manhood has, for a number or recent feminists at least, “always been known to be delusory” (Baym 127). Certainly for Baym, by the twentieth century this mythic “melodrama of beset manhood” had been transmuted into the evocation of an infantile “flight for its own sake” (127), as seen in contemporaneous suburban works such as John Updike’s *Rabbit, Run* (1960). Not unlike Hammer, Harry ‘Rabbit’ Angstrom knows the truth, that “the thing that has left his life has

left irrevocably; no search would recover it, no flight would reach it” (208), and yet Harry continues to “run, run, run,” to run across Updike’s tetralogy as he is repeatedly told, “You can’t run enough” (54). Like Baym, Annette Kolodny, too, theorizes how the American pastoral concedes a “landscape of the mind to be projected upon and perceived as an objective and external ‘real world’ landscape” (156). No longer subject to the correcting influence of everyday experience, what occurs, then, is a kind of “communal act of imagination” (Kolodny, 1975 156). In these regards, given that Cheever’s reader is presented early on in the novel with an advertising billboard, wherein a “great big colored picture of [...] mountains covered with snow” promotes “[looking] at the mountain” to take one’s “mind off his troubles” (134), implies that Hammer’s masculinist fantasy, sure enough, does not derive from the real authentic experience that he believes, as a man, he is entitled to and “[has] lost,” but rather precedes reality with the intent of “corresponding to [that] vision,” as if by some perverse consumer obligation (182).

There is little discerning Hammer’s desire for masculinity in nature, as a result, from the way in which he “fell in love – hopelessly – with the girls on magazine covers and the models who advertise girdles” (217). Though Hammer is aware of the “vastness that separates reverie from the realities of a robust and sweaty fuck on a thundery Sunday afternoon,” he, like some “soldier [or] prisoner in solitary confinement,” has “nothing to go on but [...] his imagination” which has been overhauled by commoditised desire (217). It is important to distinguish, however, that it is not so much the “flagrant [...] imitation” facet of suburbia which hinders Hammer from retrieving his masculine potential, but rather that the precepts of American masculinity, like a “disinfectant [...] advertised to smell of mountain pine woods,” are themselves insincerely concocted, and so never there for him to ‘lose’ in the first place (124). This outlook, needless to say, critically undercuts traditional essentialist conceptions of American manhood by implying that the original ‘inner directed’ frontiersman, in the same way as the suburban organisation man, acted merely in accordance to a social code. Nonetheless, it is credible to deduce that these ‘original’ men were, in effect, simply guided by “internalised ideals,” which made them “appear to be more

individualistic than they actually were” (Riesman, 1954 27). The extent to which Hammer is continually “condemned to exile” (*BP* 190) as the result of his inability to societally perform to the dictates of the suburban ethic, in consequence, directly mimics the masculine prerequisite to constantly reaffirm one is inherently “man enough” through outward “public display” (Kimmel, 1996 1).

Whether through the gendered capital of money or muscles, perpetually proving one’s maleness for hope of other men’s approval was, and is, “one of the defining experiences of men’s lives” (Kimmel, 1996 1). As Christopher Lasch explains in *The Culture of Narcissism*, “in a society in which the dream of success has been drained of any meaning beyond itself, men have nothing against which to measure their achievements except the achievements of others” (59). For Lasch, “self- approval” depends, then, on a comparative “public recognition and acclaim” (59), and it is always other men, as such, who evaluate and validate the ‘success’ of these “role players” as “connoisseurs of their own [masculine] performance” (92). This process of being continually subjected to the will of *other* men and institutions, of course, resolves American masculinity to be a historical and changing, ‘other-directed’ construct, and suburban masculinity, too, as just another manifestation of a hegemonic masculine ideology that is fundamentally based on a surface performance defined by concomitant cultural ideals and expectations. For this reason, Nailles’ pronunciation of Nellie as “his deliverer” evocatively distinguishes suburban manhood in relation to a woman, and thereby within a relative sociological power structure as opposed to upon a masculinist ‘essence’ (*BP* 241). In her conception of gender as performance, Judith Butler explains how the “process of [gendered] meaning-constitution requires that women reflect [...] masculine power and everywhere reassure that power of the reality of its illusory autonomy” (1990 57). When this feminine interplay becomes “essential to the construction of that [male] autonomy,” however, it significantly “undercuts the function it serves,” becoming the basis of a “radical dependency” that the masculine subject “persistently [...] pursues” (Butler, 1990 58). As his wife and housewife, Nellie’s “pleasant [...] composure” (*BP* 241) thereby evolves as the securing means through which Nailles

“appears” to uphold the “seemingly self-grounded autonomy” of the hierarchical male image of suburban patriarch (Butler, 1990 57). It is, in other words, her female presence, deferentially “freed from the mortal bonds of grossness and aspiration,” which ‘delivers’ him from an otherwise “contemptible” bachelorhood (*BP* 31-2).

Conversely, as the maladjusted ‘other,’ Hammer is not delivered but rather stagnated by his frequent “groping” for this “procrustean” (230) masculine mythology that he feels “he [has] lost” (191); so much so that, ironically, he cannot conform to the prevailing male ideals of suburbia and has to seek delivery through destruction. As Patrick Meanor explains, “once [Hammer] is released from his habitual condition of spiritual stasis” and into an awareness of the “nihilistic [bleakness]” of his life, he unsurprisingly “loses control,” and any sense of “real freedom” is “immediately transformed into the most obvious self-destructive behaviour” (Meanor 145). It is, of course, this subsequent “provoked rage” that provides an alternate view onto the depraved “psychological [...] disorder and illegality” (*BP* 234) hiding behind the ordered and unthreatening exterior of Nailles’ suburban façade, and which has been waiting to erupt in the pathological form of Hammer’s wanton devastation of either himself or his society (Slethaug 19).

Interestingly enough, the closing section of the novel, wherein Hammer conjures his “crazy old [...] plan to crucify [...] and murder Nailles, [...] later [changing] [his] victim to [Nailles’ son] Tony” (*BP* 219) – and toward which the split structure has ultimately been building – succeeds in cumulatively deploying the uncannily familiar tropes of the suburban Gothic, which are only mildly insinuated across the first two thirds of the novel in the shape of Mrs Wickwires’ unexplained “arm in a sling” (6) or Harry Shinglehouse’s “highly polished brown loafer lying on the cinders [of] the [train] track” (61). In his study of the suburban gothic, Martin Dines describes its literary potential for “formal and epistemological disturbance” through the gothic use of “doublings [...] and ruination,” which altogether serve “to disrupt the overly familiar way in which stories about the suburbs tend to be told,” whilst furthermore saying something “unsettling about the most familiar of American spaces” (961). What is most ‘unsettling’ about the conclusion of the novel, however, is not

so much the disruptive terror Hammer reigns on Bullet Park, but rather the ‘overly familiar’ way in which such perturbation is stylistically expressed. There is scarce detail or emotion as Nailles breaks through the door of Christ Church with a chain saw, nor resolute explanation as to why Hammer is just “sitting in a front pew, crying” (244). Moreover, once Nailles “[lifts] his son off the alter and [carries] him out in to the rain,” the novel concludes in an objective journalistic reporting of the facts:

Paul Hammer, also of Bullet Park, confessed to attempted homicide and was remanded to the State Hospital for the criminally Insane. [...] He carried Nailles to the church with the object of immolating him in the chancel. He intended, he claimed, to awaken the world (244).

This anti-epiphanic close to the novel is most significant, as it succeeds to undercut the view that either literary character must of necessity “learn something new” or “grow to maturity and psychological wholeness,” while simultaneously confirming that, in suburbia, you can either adjust and nail yourself to an inescapable set of narrow default options, or let yourself be hammered out of the system and perish - but there are no other alternatives (Slethaug 5).

Ominously, Nailles therefore continues to drug himself, and “naively” dismiss the overtly violent “news in the paper” – of “a maniac with a carbine [massacring] seventeen people in a park,” of “wars [...] raging,” of “a hairdresser [shooting] his wife, his four children, his poodle and himself” - as merely “news from another planet” (*BP* 64). It is, of course, the otherwise veiled institutional, or unconscious violences of suburbia - analogous to what Bourdieu describes as “symbolic violences” - which are exposed, then, as particularly dangerous to American men, for such violence is asserted “invisibly and insidiously through an insensible familiarisation with [the] structured physical world” (Bourdieu, 2001 38). In this context, Slavoj Žižek has argued that, “we should learn to step back, to disentangle ourselves from the fascinating lure of this distinctly visible ‘subjective’ violence, violence performed by a clearly identifiable agent,” and, instead, “perceive the contours of the background which generates such outbursts” (2009 1). The highly visible

“subjective violence” of Hammer’s act of crime and terror can be read this way not as an exception to, but rather an inevitable by-product of, a largely invisible but pervasive “systemic violence” inherent to the “normal, peaceful state of things” (Žižek, 2009 1-2); that is, as a gothic mirroring of the injurious realities of normal everyday life concealed within the suburban patterns of 1960s American consumer capitalism (Žižek, 2009 1-2). Cheever’s suburb, that “looked like a paradise” although we know, “it [is] not” (58), in this sense, knowingly persists as an haunting trope for the “unresolvable and uncanny horrors of banality” (Silverstone 226); which, like the matter of fact news reported in the media, are in constant danger of entering and contaminating your suburban “beautiful happy picture” (*BP* 134). Indeed, of turning you into an Eliot Nailles, surreptitiously ensconced into what Norman Mailer formerly deemed “a slow death by conformity” (339), whereby you must nonetheless look out through your picture window and incessantly refrain, “everything was as wonderful, wonderful, wonderful as it had been” (*BP* 245).

Chapter Two

“This-here river don’t go nowhere.”

Fraudulent Frontiers and the Failure of the Adamic Archetype in James Dickey’s *Deliverance*

“I saw myself as a young newt,
neurasthenic, scarlet
and wild in the wild coffee-coloured water.”

Robert Lowell, “Dunbarton,” *Life Studies* (1959)

In his 1955 landmark study, *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy and Tradition in the Nineteenth-century*, R.W.B. Lewis defines the American Adam as “the hero of the new adventure” – namely:

[An] individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources (Lewis 5).

Notably, this masculinist image of the independent hero “standing alone in the presence of God and nature,” finds its cultural figuration in such representations as the ‘new frontiersman,’ and thus typifies the defining masculine model of western literary mythology (Lewis 104-5). Tapering the mythic genre of the western to its discourse on masculinity, Lewis, in this way, retrospectively fortifies the late-nineteenth-century sentiments of Frederick Jackson Turner’s “frontier thesis,” wherein the maverick ethos forged through the “stalwart and rugged” qualities of the frontier, proffered an operative variation of the initiation into a new or higher state of manhood (Turner 4). According to Turner, life on the western frontier embodied a “free life” in touch with primitive simplicity, whereby the white American frontiersman could explore his strength and sagacity to the fullest in the midst of

those raw “natural resources” that demanded “manly exertion” (Turner 92). It is, therefore, important to appreciate Lewis’ evocation of the American Adam as an ideology of masculinity, with the frontier moreover acting as the ideologically gendered space in which this specific type of “masterful masculinity” may arise as the ideal American male identity (Turner 57).

Given the post-war American context of Lewis’ work, however, this inference is, on the other hand, somewhat remote from the passive, contemplative pleasures of a modern mass society, and as such fails to elucidate what may become of heroism in the prevailing urban world of no frontiers. As Turner states, it was the very “survivalist ideals” of the frontier, in stark contrast with the pampered partialities of modern civilisation, which “tempered men into Americans” (71). If, then, the American hero, like Turner stipulates, exemplifies the active antithesis to the indecisive masses of bourgeois society, how could a contained, commoditised culture, with its sanitizing emphasis on collectivity and uniformity, persuasively produce the creativity of the imaginative Adamic individual? To this end, using language that resonates in such 1950s works as David Riesman’s *The Lonely Crowd*, Lewis laments that, “American thought and expression would not,” in fact, as part of the post-World War Two culture of capital and conformity, “seem very hospitable to the moral and artistic sensibility” of the “Emersonian figure,” Adam (Lewis 197). It hence follows that the contemporaneous rise of new movements tended toward corporate capitalism was rather complemented by “symptoms of a psychological malaise uncontrolled by any cultural tradition,” at which point chronic concerns over the psychological effects of consumerism, materialism, and suburbanisation on the “autonomous national character” unerringly emerged (Riesman, 1950 125).

These ensuing trepidations, in essence, expose the depersonalising dilation of a mass market-based society to be a substantive threat to the self upon which gender distinctions rely, as the economic shift from production to the “ever expanding frontier of consumption” likewise personifies the symbolic displacement of traditional ‘masculine’ heavy labour to ‘feminine’ aid and support (Riesman, 1950 79). In congruence with the foregoing machismo

ideology of the western frontier, Michael Kimmel asserts that the industrial domain of physical labour had customarily delivered the “moral means” by which the “muscular working man” may productively position his body to validate “normative standards of hegemonic masculinity” (1996 251). Yet whereas manufacture-based capitalist methodology may have afforded the release of autonomous male energies, the capital concentrated “standardisation of tools and jobs,” followed by the “fragmentation of jobs into minute and discrete tasks” (Kimmel, 1996 58), meant modern mass production conversely commanded a systematically synchronised “soporific stupefaction” of workers personalities, forcing men to behaviourally conform in a precast manner consistent with commercial values (157). This emotionally precarious ‘market-place’ mould, which left “frightened little men” highly susceptible to feminisation through its “ready-made” negation of individualism, respectively undermines those heretofore trusted patriarchal paradigms, sooner substituting its hollow “cookie cutter corporate” templates with the benign passivity required for a homogenised market arena to function effectively (Kimmel, 1996 175).

Owing to this move in America from a society directed by the importance of manual production to a culture dominated by the imperative of market consumption, the “ever-retreating frontier” so became merely the wasteland of the mass society, with the male hero himself displacing responsibility onto the external authority of a bureaucratically ‘feminised’ organisation (Turner 37). The now automated Adam, as it were, subsequently lacked any “unique [or] inherent resources,” and in doing so unwittingly chose not to ‘choose,’ but to ‘conform’ to a perception of society’s preferred type of personality (Lewis 5). Erich Fromm contends that it was precisely this creation of the “market orientated” personality, what he came to define as “automaton conformity,” that created the foundations for a contemporary crisis of masculinity (1941 16). For him, the “pathology of conformity” was a “socially patterned defect” through which an estranged population adjusted to an “unhealthy society,” and through which the contemporary alienated man was inwardly manipulated to succumb to the “false consciousness” of economic authoritarianism (Fromm, 1941 24). Similarly, C. Wright Mills offers a critique of this new conformist white-collar manhood as “more

pathetic than protean,” relentlessly “routinized” by the “impersonal principle of organisation” (109). In his view, the demands of corporate life had malformed the “man as hero” into “victim,” leaving him “confused and vacillating in [his] opinions, unfocused and discontinuous in [his] actions,” but too “afraid to grumble” (Mills 353). The relevance of such analyses here is, then, that the biddable blocking of self-awareness transpires not externally, but internally, thereby concealing the subtly punitive power of late capitalism even as it transforms and curtails the possibilities of expression open to men. In consequence, this notion of a degraded male self-sufficiency is acutely significant, for what may primarily distinguish mid-twentieth-century discussions of American masculinity from those before is this growing awareness of the penetrability of the male psyche.

Such sentence does, however, in turn, disclose a principal preoccupation with white, heterosexual, bourgeois masculinity, as it was this class of men who believed themselves entitled to the power that attended upon the successful demonstration of machismo, and so suffered an immediate sense of impotent isolation during this turbulent time. Andrew Hoberek’s study of middle-class consciousness during the post-war period respectively affirms this belief, claiming that the rhetoric of the “organisation man,” that is, the rhetoric of “constrained agency” or “agency panic,” wrings its hands over the supposed loss of autonomy among middle-class men who were increasingly abandoning independent entrepreneurship for white-collar positions in corporate America (8). It is, therefore, worth regarding the advances of corporate affluence together with what Gail Bederman diagnosed as a “neurasthenic breakdown,” so as to effectively frame the contemporary crisis of masculinity in terms of a post-industrial malaise; by way of which middle-class American men had become inherently inclined to refute their “vital energies” by “over-stimulating themselves with civilisation” (88). According to Bederman, throughout late-nineteenth-century medical discourse, ‘neurasthenia’ defines the “self-restrained manliness” of civilisation - long thought to be contingent upon control - not as a source of supremacy, but rather “a symptom of nerve exhaustion” (88). Given that the “tightly leashed” sensibilities of civilised masculine authority were already considered a physical “*attribute* of the white male

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body,” the application of neurasthenia conversely expounded the cultural debility of urbane masculinity as a somatic “*sickness* of the white male body” (Bederman 88). This neurasthenic masculine mode thus effectually pertains to the modern masculine condition; for although neurasthenia, as a medical theory, was largely discredited by the early-twentieth century, many of the stereotypes it identified – based on the understanding that hyper-civilised refinement was a socialised disorder requiring remediation – continued to circulate widely within post-sixties American culture.

With this in mind, contemporary American men were inexorably prone to neurasthenia because the increased technological pace of late capitalist civilisation placed greater emphasis on them as “businessmen and professionals,” thereby rupturing any affirmative assimilation between work and other aspects of male life (Bederman 88). This lack of integration subsequently led to a mere gratuitous existence of consumer “ease and self-indulgence,” whereupon the instinctual quintessence of manhood, imagined as having once been found in man’s vehement relationship with nature, was reduced to a nervously neurasthenic, “decadent wreck” (Bederman 88). Arguably, the real issue that lurks behind the ‘masculinity crisis’ facing American society is, thus, not so much that traditional male roles were endangered, but that men themselves were in danger of not (re)acting. This somatization of the social and political symptoms of a decentred white masculinity gives particular emphasis to the belief that volatile and violent qualities are an integral, and often desirable part of the human order; whereas the loss of those aggressive primal urges is a form of castration, which cuts off access to the full realm of male experience. The succeeding perception of modern man as, in effect, emasculated, passive, out of touch with nature and his instincts, moreover perpetuates the sense that there is some “existential narrative of conflict between individual and society” at play, which poses a retreat to the raw, physical, enduring values of the spirit as the foremost resort of a self consumed by such an overpowering regimentation (Hoberek 11). It is, therefore, necessary to be aware of neurasthenia, as reconfigured within the particular dynamics of commodity culture, as a very specifically masculine angst deeply rooted in nostalgia; one which, for that reason, serves

not only to communicate the cultural weakness of civilised masculinity, but efficaciously outlines that homologous state of perpetually “unsatisfied desire” for which a dense “libidinal economy of repression” could devise few legitimate outlets for men (Kimmel, 1996 31, 267).

Calling male neurasthenia the late-nineteenth-century version of “executive hysteria,” Elaine Showalter attributes the most significant causes of this “diagnosis of choice” to those “sedentary habits” among urban male “intellectuals, ambitious professionals, and overworked executives” (Showalter 65). She likewise identifies the way in which “individual hysterias,” in this case, neurasthenia, “connect with modern social movements,” for example, late capitalist consumerism, “to produce psychological epidemics,” such as the contemporary crisis of masculinity (Showalter 3). With neurasthenia embodying the critical means by which to figure the specific subtleties of a wounded white-collar masculinity in the late capitalist era, it then follows that the men’s liberationist discourse emerging throughout the late sixties became structured around this antithetical tension between the natural “sovereignty” of physical expression and the social “servility” of capitalist conformity (Showalter 48), with the principal intention of instilling the embracement of regressive “tribalism and drum-beating” as the “preferred treatment” and re-masculinising remedy to the effeminising qualities of an upper-class, consumerist lifestyle (Showalter 66). The stratification of this dichotomy across such purposely-gendered lines furthermore intimates the extent to which any achievement of masculine actuality remains consistently dependent on a male privileging paradigm, conceptually wrought in brute resistance to femininity as it resides in the male self. Thus, under the aspect of the primeval motif and the masculinised archetypes it implicitly codifies, this ‘men’s rights movement’ progressively took on new and more extreme proportions in 1960s America, causing the prototypical authoritarian male to reassert masculine prerogatives by way of a defensively reactive redemption of a belligerently violent hypermasculine identity.

In a replay of the frontier quest for macho heroism, the “suburban, middle-aged” male, “experiencing vague symptoms of depression, fear of aging, and fatigue,” began to

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pursue a series of 'deeply masculine' wilderness activities, rapidly immersing himself in "travel, adventure, and vigorous exercise" in an effort to "revive self-esteem" through primitive physicality (Showalter 66). At a moment when the frontier had purportedly 'disappeared,' perhaps the most notable vehicle to reassure this manhood was the self-expressive and self-validating violence of the hunt, which came forth as a surrogate power source and potent proving ground for masculine recreation. After all, neurasthenic men needed some way to "rediscover masculinity," and the fortifying austerity of the "rugged outdoors" was, according to many concurrent masculinity theorists, consistently trumpeted as "restorative of the flagging manhood of modern civilised men" (Kimmel, 1996 100). In the words of William Kent, a California congressman concerned with the waning of manhood since the loss of the national character-building frontier, the "savagery of the hunt" reverted the American male to a glad 'barbarian', who knew that if he was "a barbarian, he was, at any rate, "a man."¹⁵ Richard Slotkin elaborates on this conversion, writing how the masculine hero's focus on reclaiming order through violence, or "regeneration through violence," necessitates the regression to a "more primitive and natural condition of life" so that the "false values of the 'metropolis' can be purged and a new purified social contract enacted" (1992 14). In short, this devolution into a primitivist spectacle of male release fittingly reprises the predacious aspirations of the western frontier; actively blurring the line between the savage and the civilised frontier hero in order to ratify a reclamation of the mythopoetic conceptions, constructions, and definitions of masculinity in American culture, as well as a reconsolidation of the patriarchal system within, and for which, they were formulated.

By reason of this belief in primitivism as a cure for neurasthenic crises, it is useful to return to Lewis' Adamic masculine archetype, stated at the start of the chapter as the definition of a man in the action of constant self-creation and self-representation. In view of the fact that the realm of late-capitalist production had been so transformed to the point that

¹⁵ Kent is cited in Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*. New Haven: Yale University Press. 1967, 153.

men could no longer verify their manhood by their position in the market, the reform from corporate chattel to frontier fugitive purposely prompted the return to an Adamic age, “untouched and undefiled” by any crises of gender identification (Lewis 5). With this attitude in mind, and through the retrospective lens of Lewis and Turner, Jonathan Mitchell re-envision the American Adam as a “prime atemporal structure” having an “enormous effect on the twentieth century” (2). Mitchell argues how - in the face of America’s dominant position - many ‘Americanists’ looked back to late nineteenth-century, particularly the frontier history of the American west, in order to find a “usable past” as a foundation for modern American literature and identity (Mitchell 3). In doing this, they effectually “sharpened the ideological edge of this mythologisation of history” and, indeed, liberated the frontier from its “historical limitations” to provide a basis for a politics of identity, “at the heart of which was the atemporal American self, Adam” (Mitchell 3). Thus, during the latter course of the century, the Adamic western hero “lost its literary distance,” and beliefs in the “Adamic righteousness of American democracy” came to play a significant shaping role in concurrent political and cultural life (Mitchell 3).

This, of course, brings us back to the issue of frontier masculinity, and iterates the question; exactly why was the symbolic west embraced with such unusual intensity and nostalgia at this historical moment? According to Jane Tompkins, the individualist values of the west boldly appealed to a “wild west of the psyche” (6), which she describes as the psychic hunger for real, hard, visceral experience; “action that totally saturates the present moment, totally absorbs the body and mind, and directs one’s life to the service of an unquestioned goal” (Tompkins 12). Similarly, Robert Brinkmeyer posits the literary genre of the ‘western’ as inseparable from larger national matters of masculine identity and purpose, critically mapping its “unenclosed world free from the nets of culture” as a vast “wide-open space” wherein the pioneering male hero “survives the elements by acting elementally” (28). To this end, the western narrative not only has a “timeless appeal,” but unlike many other forms of prevalent literature, possesses a particular ability to “adapt and adjust its formula” according to “shifting cultural demands” – all the while performing this “specific cultural

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work” and remaining distinct as the “Western” (Brinkmeyer 29). Put simply, the west and the genre of the western let “good ole boys be boys again,” juvenily free from the everyday commoditised, domesticized, cultural constraints routinely retarding the modern American male (Brinkmeyer 30). It is, therefore, no wonder contemporary male writers across America, most notably in the South, began to adopt the mythic western narrative of the frontier so as to account for, and respond to, the historical, social, and political decentring of what was once considered the masculine normative in American cultural life.

The stance in recent American fiction wherein southern writers looked back at the south from the symbolic west first arrived with James Dickey’s debut novel, *Deliverance* (1970), and has now become a literal as well as figurative place in the work of Cormac McCarthy and others. In his study of contemporary southern writers and the west, Brinkmeyer argues how this imaginative shift toward the western frontier was in large part a response to the seeming “dehumanisation and homogenisation of postmodern culture,” and, as such, exemplary of a “startling break in the southern literary tradition” (1). Indeed, whereas fiction in the classic American tradition tended to celebrate a solitary hero “breaking out *from* a restrictive society” and “*into* a world of uncharted freedom,” southern fiction was more often inclined to commend those who did not leave the community, but “integrate themselves into it” (Brinkmeyer 4). That is to say, if the American pioneer hero linearly sets out away from society and into the wilderness, the southern hero typically stays and braces, rather than breaks free from the boundaries separating culture from wilderness. Yet across the last few decades, a number of significant southern authors like Dickey have transgressed the margins of value and meaning in southern literature by writing westerns. So even though Dickey’s text is evidently not western in terms of its Georgia setting, its fundamental plot patterns and thematic trepidations nonetheless make it a classic narrative of the frontier. What is more, *Deliverance* successfully signals the contemporary southern novelist’s first move toward the west and the western, a movement that gave rise to writing ‘westerns’ set in the south.

At first glance, *Deliverance* appears to conform closely to the prototypical western narrative sequence, charting anxieties about conditions from which people - or more appropriately, men - wish to escape. Working as a graphics consultant and director who feels "as unobserved and impotent as a ghost, going through the only motions it has," Dickey's central protagonist, Ed Gentry, desperately seeks release from the concomitant feelings of emasculation in both his business and married life (15). For Ed, the banal "day-to-day" existence of "middle-class householders" (3), overwrought with the feminising effects of white-collar work and familial responsibilities, represents the "normalcy" that inevitably inhibits men (23). Furthermore, unable to care "less about anything or anybody (23), Ed's profound dissatisfaction with "the life he was in" effectively betokens the discontent engendered by consumer society, wherein those faceless, nondescript notions of 'normality' are enforced with a desperate passion (5). As Lewis Medlock points out, Lewis being "the only man [Ed] knew who could do with his life exactly what he wanted" (3), Ed's dilemma is that he has everything society promises, causing him to fall "out of touch with everything, with the other forms of life" (38). Contrary to that mythic American hero who embodies an intimate union with, and understanding of, "the whole wilderness" (109), the modern 'gentrified' man, of whom Ed is a near-perfect example, suffers a reality ostensibly alienated from nature, in which "everything [is] dead" (38). It is, therefore, this sense of the feminised social world that provides the context against which the masculinised natural world of the river can unfold, and drawing on the American literary tradition - which, in Nina Baym's words, is structured around "melodramas of beset manhood" (123) - Dickey frames his story of male regeneration as a classic narrative of the frontier.

Experiencing their hypermodern metropolis as deeply emasculating because it does not call for heroic survival, Ed and Lewis, along with their two Atlanta suburbanite friends, Bobby Trippe and Drew Ballinger, subsequently set forth on a homosocial flight from feminising civilisation toward the virile wilderness of the Cahulawassee River. Dickey's narrative investment in the "remaking of manhood" (Bederman 78) hence hinges on the archetypal hero quest of which Slotkin persistently writes, involving a "law-abiding

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individual” who ventures “figuratively or literally back in time into a primitive world – downward into his own consciousness until the basic or primitive core of the psyche is revealed” (Slotkin, 1973 284). To this end, the four men work to recover a ‘true’ or ‘original’ masculinist essence by getting “in touch” with the ‘primitive’ elements of human nature and incorporating the expression of violence into the male body (*DL* 38). Yet through the author’s violent and abject portrayal of the local “nine-fingered” mountain men (49), together with a penetrative exploration into the political and physical dynamics of male rape, it becomes clear that these men “don’t really know what [they’re] getting into,” as the ambivalence surrounding this mythic American ideal is made painfully apparent, exposing not just its failure in contemporary America but, moreover, its impossibility in the first place (4).

Though much criticism of *Deliverance* has endorsed the author’s return to an archetypal American plot in which nature succumbs to what passes for progress, such appreciation ineffectually illustrates the extent to which Dickey’s text principally serves as a contemporaneous revision of these prototypical narratives; perversely disparaging the rationale of a malleable post-sixties civilisation against the exuberant forces of the feral south. The polarisation of such images, in this manner, rather discloses a complex of sexually charged dualisms, whereby the division into ‘hard’ nature and ‘soft’ culture furthermore suggests an excessive political preoccupation with, and ambivalent anxiety about, the changing gendered landscape of modern American society. The question of whether the novel proposes masculine redemption of a sort, and the concern over which of these conflicting ways of life may in fact achieve a gendered ‘deliverance,’ is, therefore, of particular consequence. The remainder of this chapter will proceed to determine Dickey’s discerning search for masculine liberation in this way; that is say, as an indicator of the inadequacy of the myth of masculinity, which is ultimately based on “a game, a charade” that is no longer tenable (60). The theory of masculine degeneration as experienced by Ed and his masculine counterparts will likewise be determined as a direct result of this adversely mythologised “regeneration through violence,” which urges the “retrieval of masculinity”

through an “orgy of sanctimonious and self-justifying violence” (Slotkin, 1973 374). The sense of loss underlying Dickey’s narrative will in turn surface to show the detrimentally vacuous nature of such masculinity tropes, for it is the male characters’ own misconceived and mythicized masculine expectation that is in the end “useless,” and “always has been” (*DL* 237).

Before discussing this flight toward the American wilderness in detail, it is worthwhile commenting on the primary conditions these male characters are fleeing from, and locating their experience in the woods in relation to their foremost “feeling of [...] inconsequence” within the civilised world (14). Explicitly entitled “Before,” the opening section of the novel saliently outlines Ed’s diminishing social currency with respect to his unrealised masculine desires; which are, according to Sally Robinson, “largely linked to women” and the “suffocating feminisation” that marks his world of work (166). The descriptive stream of female “secretaries and file clerks” Ed notices flowing all around him, their hairstyles phallically “horned” and “stiff,” denotes the castrating emergence of women - through the advent of ‘second-wave’ feminism in the mid-sixties - in what had been customarily accepted as an exclusively ‘male’ public sphere (*DL* 12). Given that men habitually expected to be the unimpeachable centre of their social worlds, the modern prevalence of women in the workplace openly affronted male economic privilege for the first time and, in that way, repealed the oppositional vulnerabilities and weaknesses upon which normative masculinity’s traditional, virile values depended. Indeed, while in terms of class, times like the Great Depression disempowered millions of working-class American men, the difference here is economic change dovetailed with a new moral permissiveness for women, which meant the total financial malaise in the twenties and thirties did not have the same gelding impact as post-sixties progressive liberalism on these dominant paradigms. But rather than Dickey explicitly identifying the “agents of Ed’s blockage” as such (Robinson 167), the “desolation” his protagonist experiences amid the tide of “barren, gum-chewing [...] female survivors” implies a particular masculine anxiety about the contemporary

emancipation of women, as well as the respectively impeding result such feminine autonomy would have on the hierarchal ways by which men defined their manhood (*DL* 12-13).

The fact that Ed can't see "another man anywhere" (12), though "at that moment [he] wanted to (14), overtly substantiates the effective dissolution of those homosocial communities in which men could exhibit a form of masculinity that defines itself in opposition to femininity. With no means to resist, Ed is, in fact, forced to submit to the feminizing flood of secretaries as he declares, "I knew better. I was of them" (12). This reference to his "sense of being someone else" (15), of Ed being displaced "in a body" in which he was "failing to feel [his] heart beat" (22, 14), necessarily invoke a castrating image of the municipal male body as a "dammed vessel of primitive impulses" (Robinson 170), stagnantly stuck "in a chair that won't move" (*DL* 35). Indeed, the corresponding "weight of lassitude" being "set in the very bone marrow" (14), furthermore evinces Ed's neurasthenic and bored body not as "a strong storage battery, highly charged with tightly leashed masculine sexuality," but instead, as an "undercharged battery with a dangerous scarcity of nerve force" (Bederman 88). The disabling disaffection of Ed's "unmistakably man-made city life" thereby occurs through psychosomatic terms, and with these terms comes a gendered discourse that pits the rise of a synthetically soft, affect-centred manhood against the time-honoured ideals of an authentically coarse, 'hard-shell' masculinity (*DL* 17).

Following Mikhail Bakhtin's lexicon of 'classical' and 'grotesque' contradictory registers of being, Susan Bordo helps to set this dichotomous iconography in a specifically gendered context.¹⁶ For her, the imagined ideal of a "bound" and "armoured" classical body, "upstanding" with "steel-hard [...] constancy," mediates a physically expressive form of hegemonic hypermasculinity (Bordo, 1993 48). In Dickey's text, however, protagonist Ed's male body – pitifully primed to "shrivel" from the "inactivity" of his middle-class corporate life (*DL* 167) – is reinforced with regard to its grotesquely "fat ass" corporal vulnerability

¹⁶ Bakhtin writes that, in its "closed, impenetrable" state, the 'classical' body "[refuses] social interchange," thereby maintaining a wholly firm and erect form inverse to the ambivalently "open [and] gaping" 'grotesque' body, which may be read, at least in Ed's case, as feminine due to its "[readiness] to engage with," that is, to be penetrated by "the material world" (Bakhtin 22).

(97), thereby coding the declining flesh of this “exposed and defenceless, no longer armoured warrior” as comparatively “flaccid” and “feminine” (Bordo, 1993 48). Physically “*bound* and determined,” but only “to do everything wrong” (*DL* 85; emphasis added), Ed acknowledges that he is “not in awfully good shape” (85), and when “looking in the side-lighted mirror” he describes how:

[It] shone far up into the thinnest of my hair, unerringly finding the part of it that was receding the most rapidly and shadowed the underpart of my eyes in a way that made me know that they would never again be as they had been. Aging with me was going to come on fast (24).

Visibly “ball-headed and fat” (99), the cultural politics of this somewhat minor scene are important, for the descriptive loss of hair invokes a familiar fear of the male body’s dissolution through aging, just as the security of economic expansion, consumerism, suburbanism, and the ‘normalcy’ of the nuclear family comes to seem threatening to masculine identity in the postwar era. Indeed, it is vital to stress that, because Ed has been psychologically “[eaten] alive” (79) by the requirements of the social, he is likewise physically blockaded from realising, or releasing his own masculine desires. He is, moreover, entirely helpless to stop “the morale of the whole western world” from “raping [his] secrecy” until there is “nothing left” (17). In other words, while Ed’s body is symbolically “sealed from itself” (31), it is “never closed off from either its social or eco-systematic context,” which makes his psychophysical deformation emblematic of a more general social malaise that demarcates the decimation of traditional modes of masculinity by late capitalist commoditisation and feminisation (Bakhtin 22).

Significantly, Lewis Medlock seeks to forestall his awareness of this “mortal, helpless, time-terrified human feeling” (*DL* 15) by “[holding] on to his body [...] by any means” (7). The “human body,” according to Lewis, is the “one thing you can’t fake” (36). In his own words:

‘[The] whole thing is going to be reduced to the human body, once and for all. I want to be ready. [...] I think the machines are going to fail, the political systems are going to fail, and a few men are going to take to the hills and start over.’ (36).

Such theorisation of the body by Lewis posits a survivalist ethos based on a belief in masculine essence, which is otherwise unrecognised in Ed, whose paralytically commoditised form has been programmed to “move to the water cooler [...] as though posing for a house ad” (14-5). The fact that he self-determinedly “lifted weights and shot arrows every day,” furthermore foregrounds Lewis’ comparative bodily agency, together with an essentialist appreciation of, and psychic investment in, the male body as the bearer of an inherent and natural masculine identity (4). R.W. Connell expressively explicates the extent to which essentialist ideologies commonly presuppose masculinity as emanating from, and being driven by, the male body. She describes this “body inescapable” definition of masculine gender as a “certain feel to the skin, certain muscular shapes and tensions” that accordingly attest to the “irreducible bodily dimension in experience and practice” (Connell 51). Of course, the idea that masculinity has some “essential basis” effectually “proceeding from men’s bodies” (Connell 45), likewise adduces the purposeful “conditioning and reconditioning” (*DL* 24) of the male physique as a natural manifestation of manhood; and hence why Lewis “liked particularly to take some extremely specialised and difficult form of sport – usually one he could do by himself – and evolve a personal approach to it which he could then expound” (2). To this end, Kimmel notes how sport was used across post-sixties America to “counteract the enervating tendency of the times” and to strengthen the natural “vigour” of men (1996 101). It was “through sports, not work,” that men could escape their contemporaneous “struggle for manliness,” and discover the “best kind of exercise” to demonstrate “courage” and “self-control” (Kimmel, 1996 101-2). In short, sport helped turn “boys into men” in an era where ‘traditional’ means had been made redundant (Kimmel, 1996 101), and as proven by Lewis, “all men were once boys [...] looking for ways to become men” (*DL* 60).

In these terms, Lewis' "muscle-bound" and "classic, knowledgeable form" (*DL* 87, 116), which could "[swim] as [...] easily [...] as [it] did everything else," offers a highly specialised corporeal identity that initially commands both Ed and the reader's appreciation and awe (*DL* 4). Having "never seen him with his clothes off," the impressive spectacle of Lewis "in the water naked, booming overhand down the current with a lot of back showing," looms large in Ed's imagination (87-8). He exclaims how:

Everything [Lewis] had done for himself for years paid off as he stood there in his tracks, in the water. [...] I had never seen such a male body in my life, even in the pictures of weight-lifting magazines [...]. The muscles were bound up in him smoothly, and when he moved, the veins in the moving part would surface. [...] You could even see the veins in his gut, and I knew I could not even begin to conceive how many sit-ups and leg raises – and how much dieting – had gone into bringing them into view (87-8).

Crucially, Lewis is presented through depictions of his powerfully sculpted physique; which, according to Mark Graybill, exudes the "hypermasculine strength" and "physical robustness" of the male athlete (125). But whereas Ed compares him to "Johnny Weissmuller in the old Tarzan movies" (*DL* 87), Graybill more securely locates Lewis within the "post-Schwarzenegger mold" (Graybill 125), and in doing so aligns Lewis' own "weight lifting, diet [and] exercise," his 'body-building' if you will, in conjunction with the historical emergence of the contemporary muscle-bound action hero (*DL* 4). This is a decidedly noteworthy observation by Graybill, for the advent of the modern hyper-muscular idol - of whom Arnold Schwarzenegger is typical - pointedly occurs alongside the decline of manual labour in Western societies from the late 1960s, thereby signifying a compensatory, yet highly contrived redisplay of the physically motivated masculine body in an era where traditional modes of male action and identity based on physicality have been undercut by the economic implications of deindustrialisation. Indeed, the cinematic casting of Burt Reynolds to play Lewis Medlock in John Boorman's 1972 film adaptation of *Deliverance* confirms the

essentially “eroticising and objectifying” nature of this macho redisplay, with the visibly “bounded” and “buff” Reynolds typifying a male physicality always “on the verge of the excessive” (Robinson 173).¹⁷ Lewis’ superlative corporeality, deduced in relation to the glossy and groomed Reynolds style “pictures in weight-lifting magazines” (*DL* 87), should thus be read less in terms of male essence, and more with regard to this fetishized exteriority, which ultimately exposes Lewis’ “definite standards” of the body as a capitalistic curtailment of masculine desire not dissimilar from Ed’s (*DL* 2).

What is most interesting about the unspoken exchange between the two men in the water, is, then, the way in which Lewis knowingly “glanced” back at Ed, suggesting a deliberate displaying of his male body, together with a narcissistic willingness to welcome the attendant gaze as confirmative of his manhood (87). Certainly, Lewis is very mindful of himself as an object of repeated spectacularisation as well as a subject of action; tacitly acknowledging his body, through excessive physical effort, to resemble the power and potency of the phallus. Niall Richardson deems the concurrent “bodybuilding” trend in America to be a “culturally specific form of phallus worship” (64), and in so doing implies that it is not a return to authenticity or the ‘real’ body, but an object or ‘image’ of the body that is desired, with Lewis ultimately valuing his masculine worth through the “payoff [...] in [Ed’s] eyes” (*DL* 87). This remunerative term “payoff” allies Lewis’ phallic investment in the body to an economic process of capitalist exchange. His muscular physique thereby operates in the same way as a consumable commodity amid the successive market logic of desire, while Ed’s gaze works as the compensatory currency of social and epistemological exchange. The self-conscious pressure to “make” himself “fit into [his] own fantasy,” calls attention to the fact that this phallic capitalisation is not properly Lewis’ own, but rather has been “shoved off” on him by partially placed fantasies enthralled in cultural ideologies to which Lewis then has to “measure up” (*DL* 42-3). Lewis himself unduly insists, “You think I’m some kind of narcissistic fanatic. But I’m not,” articulating a self-awareness that

¹⁷ In the same year, Reynolds gained notoriety when he posed nude in the April (Vol. 172, No. 4) issue of *Cosmopolitan* magazine.

perspicaciously presents these compulsions toward physical effort as no longer within his own immediate, masculine control (36).

Here it is propitious to invoke Jacques Lacan's "symbolic order" – namely those compulsory social practices that "link [...] subjects together in one action" - so as to help further foreground Lewis' obsessional corporeal conditioning in direct accordance with the increasingly commodified ideals of an American culture of consumerism (1997 230). According to Lacan, when entering into the social strictures of the 'symbolic order' the male subject is incapable of controlling his own desires since those desires are themselves separated from actual bodily needs, in the same way the "phallus" is separated from any "biological penis" (1983 82). The "ontological reduction" of Lewis "to his phallus" (Richardson 174) highlights his "muscular [...] mystique" (*DL* 24) as effectively removed from the materiality of his biologic drives, and, instead, as governed by a "symbolic objectification" of the male body "through the eye of an imagined other" (Lacan, 1977 100). In this regard, Ed's lucrative gaze functions as "objet petit a," providing the means for Lewis to establish the coordinates of his own desire, whilst all at once making such desire unviable to fulfil (Lacan, 1977 83). The fact that Lewis utilises "[Ed's] eyes" (*DL* 87) as a "screen for [his] own narcissistic projections" (Lacan, 1997 40), furthermore invokes the tensive semiotics surrounding the hyper-muscular physique, as the aesthetic "appearance of the body" becomes the "ultimate goal" as opposed to the normative experience of the male body as a "tool for getting the job done" (Richardson 44).

Lewis' is, in consequence, a male body separated from the authentic physicality of manual work, and one that has been developed by design in the gym to rather just resemble such labouring bodies. His physically acquired boundaries are, as it happens, drawn from the outside - from the "idealised images" of armoured bodies pervading the imaginary of American commercial culture - and necessarily reliant on a "lack," since "fantasy," by definition, "does not correspond to anything in the real" (1997 40). Because he is working to this level of "fantasy construction," Lewis' attempt to mask with muscles the sense of loss at the heart of modern man reveals a fundamentally futile effort to reinscribe the corporeal into

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the symbolic; which, Lacan suggests, cannot help but occur as “mere [...] object” in the consumer age (Lacan, 1997 5). The physical description of Lewis as being “made out of well-matched redbrown chunks wrapped in blue wire” (*DL* 87), to this end, disconcertingly likens the hyper-muscularised body to an enlarged joint of raw beef, indicating a shift in positioning from the male body “[having] meat,” which connotes power and energy, to the red-blooded male body as meat, denoting an inert object to be used and consumed (*DL* 84). Such discernment of the body as consumptive capital and fetish subsequently isolates Lewis from his own corporeality, essentially expounding his excessive male body in ‘cultural’ rather than ‘natural’ terms, whilst furthermore disclosing the physical ‘armouring’ of the male form as an equivalent deforming of the masculine psyche.

For Klaus Theweleit, the armoured body is a “defensive shield” or “machinic substitute” for a “damaged ego,” one that, however, “debilitates this ego all the more,” inaugurating a delibidinization of the body that “ends in total paralysis” (75). Paradoxically, the classically bound body is, thus, rendered “dysfunctional” (Theweleit 75) as an effective masculine source, with Lewis himself professing a periodic need “to get out” from under this ‘defensive shield,’ to have the “luxury” of not having to “lift weights, or work out on the bag [...] for a while” and to escape the “laborious [...] burden” of this psychotic physicality, which is becoming “too heavy to bear” (*DL* 7). Knowing this, Lewis’ ‘machoism’ respectively emerges as a fundamentally one-dimensional, and thus emotionally restrictive mask, deliberately self-donned to hide his own inalienable masculine insecurities, while further feigning the male personality that he ultimately wishes to be. The recurrent acting out of this assumed muscle-bound persona moreover exemplifies the masochistic and harmful constraints surrounding such a compulsively competitive, culturally configured masculinity, as the pressure and compulsion to “operate,” where “many another want to crap out” (37), becomes an internally sanctioned form of oppression that even Lewis “couldn’t make work” (6).

Though he may very well be the focus of Ed’s emulation, “had [Ed] had [the] choice of looking like any man, or combination of men on earth, or in history” (24), it is clear that

Lewis' delusions of bodily splendour are driven by a culturally manipulated fear of male internal weakness, which results in his adversarial desire to identify with "immortal" strength (6). Dickey himself markedly maintained that Lewis is "the victim of a crushing inferiority complex," hence why he feels the need to spend "enormous amounts of time" making himself "impressive physically," so that he can "make other people feel inferior" (1970 74). Lewis' macho "self-image," to this end, is born of the same desperate "dissatisfaction" with, and intense "despising of himself" that Ed experiences, followed by the wistful yearning to be "something other than what they are" (Dickey, *VC* 74). This "fantasy" of a hyper-muscularised metamorphosis is, however, inevitably just that, when realistically Lewis too "lived in the suburbs, like the rest of us," with "money, a good-looking wife, and three children" (*DL* 36), and a "rental property he had inherited," and which "he had to be near" (*DL* 3). Nevertheless, scholars such as Frederic Jameson still contend Lewis' "technical and instrumental capability" to be the embodiment of a hypermasculine ideal entirely distinct from Ed's effeminate "ennui," thereby disavowing the extent to which Lewis undergoes the same prefatory crisis of masculinity from which Ed is suffering (Jameson 182). Having said that, this understanding does effectually illustrate the way in which readers and characters alike can be "taken in" (Dickey, *VC* 75) by the habitual, if not nostalgically ritualised associations that define the mythic archetypes of American masculinity, with Ed avowedly conceding how "these techniques and mystiques had built up in [Lewis] something that impressed [him] a good deal, even so" (*DL* 3).

Implicit in this phrase "even so" is an awareness on Ed's part of the pseudo nature of Lewis' hypermasculine physique mystique; one which, nonetheless, fails to curb what Jennifer Schell labels his "man crush" on Lewis (218). Despite having the "clear sense" that Lewis had both "talked this up too much," and "never really talked about it at all" (*DL* 37), Ed is unable to determine his own masculine worth in respect of the physical prowess he reveres in Lewis; decreeing that "[Lewis'] strong as the devil [...], and he's in shape. I'm not" (*DL* 62). Schell adopts this particular term "man crush" to suggest a homosocial, yet ultimately "one-sided adoration" between the two men, with Ed pinning all of his hopes for

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masculine 'delivery' on Lewis, "a man who, ironically, is equally discontent" (Schell 211). Much as he does with the men in the magazines, Ed gazes on Lewis' body in order to gauge the masculine power of the ideal, effusively indulging that inconsolable desire to possess such power himself. Ed is very much aware, however, that he has "nothing like [Lewis'] drive, or his obsessions" (*DL* 6), and that the "closest he will ever come" to possessing this kind of power and masculinity is by "associating himself with someone who [he thinks] does" (Schell 217). So, although Ed articulates how much he "liked Lewis," his explication of fondness is followed not by an account of Lewis' character, but rather peculiarly by the admission that he was continually "getting caught up" in Lewis' "capricious and tenacious enthusiasms that had already taken [him] bow-hunting and varmint-calling, [...] and down into a small, miserably cold cave where there was one dead, crystalline frog" (*DL* 5). Tellingly, Lewis becomes a kind of ideologue, personifying a "desperately frightening," but "also calming" (110) American maleness that has "the appearance of always [...] going forward with joy and anticipation" (29), and which thereby compels Ed, "without [him] being completely aware," to "[follow] him anywhere" (110).

With Ed, then, subconsciously believing himself a "great deal lighter and more muscular when [he] was around Lewis," it is necessary to reiterate further the extent to which Lewis' masculine appeal is itself equally dependent on his association with Ed, and Ed's commoditising appraisal of Lewis' physique (*DL* 29). In these terms, Schell's claim that "the admired" Lewis has "all of the power [...] and control" over "the admirer" Ed, falls short, for within post-war commercial culture all that really exists is the "mediating force" of "corporate structural power and commercial values" (Jameson 58). Lewis' narcissistic investment in - combined with Ed's visual consumption of - an essentially "crystalline" machoism, then translates into merely a standardised ingesting of the prescribed image-centric system of priorities of a capital driven contemporary American society (*DL* 5). As a "mechanic of the graphic arts," Ed's image-orientated profession reflects this social model most discernibly, as it forces him to make things appear dispassionately "mechanical," and "not the result of inspiration" (22). His satisfaction is measurable, therefore, only with

regards to his command of visible criteria, and so he must symbolically “cut [Lewis] up with scissors” and “crop in” (16) a culturally manipulated image of who, or what, he imagines the ideal male should be (186). This aesthetically acclaimed manhood, configured according to a conceptual “collage [of] torn up posters, movie magazines, [and] sports headlines” (*DL* 22), and to which both men ultimately adhere, consequently coheres with the successive consumer logic of desire, creating a particular kind of “emasculating power differential” (Schell 217) between the man and the image, as they “could never match up” (*DL* 186). This “superimposed picture,” which would spasmodically “hover and disappear,” furthermore acts as an elusively addictive source of male anxiety, constantly overriding their reality, and thereby undermining any sense of masculine stability (*DL* 186).

Indeed, with their “eyes wide” but “brain asleep” (*DL* 34), it is clear that neither male is in possession of any “autonomy or individual masculine identity,” since, in truth, there is no “individually viable way of being in [this] world” (Schell 214). As Pamela Barnett points out, Lewis taunts Ed with “the city’s got you where you live” (*DL* 42), and in so doing he envisages “urbanisation as colonising the very seat of male power” (Barnett 145). With masculine valour subsequently superseded by the modest comfort of “living by antifriction” (*DL* 35), it is no surprise to find American men like Ed in a state of “self-absorbed apathy” (Barnett 102); for life in the city not only alienates Ed from a male body, but furthermore detaches him from a perhaps “authentic” self in tune with his own most “dangerous desire” (Barnett 38). Thus, when he and Lewis, along with Bobby (“a born salesman”) and Drew (“a sales supervisor for a big soft-drink company”) (*DL* 6), take a weekend wilderness trip to the “unvisited and free” (2) southern Appalachian Mountains, they effectively endeavour on a masculinist exodus away from the genericism of this “coloured no-dream [world] with objects in it” (34), and toward the primeval revival and reclamation of a “biologicistic essence of maleness” that has as yet been “tamped down, or blocked, by civil society” (Robinson 167). Comprised of mainly farm land imbedded between the conceivably elemental wilderness of the “red-neck South” (*DL* 32) and the “whole vast, inexorable web” of postmodern Atlanta, the rural hills proffer a potentially

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simpler, more rugged way of life for the men, in which that 'true' or 'natural' masculine essence may re-emerge in its purest and most primal form (*DL* 219). Dickey's escapist narrative is centrally focused around this opposition between the "modern conveniences" of a late capitalist civilisation, which "does not," nor will it ever, "deliver enough" (42-3), and the promise of "something important" being there, "in the hills" (34). In both cases, this "promise" that "promised other things, another life, deliverance" (*DL* 24), conflates the violent 'release' of primitive impulses to masculine health, whilst linking the adverse repression of such natural energies to the psychic and physiological harm Dickey's male characters endure at the start of the novel.

As Marc Fasteau asserts in his 1975 study, *The Male Machine*, Dickey's *Deliverance* observes the "authentic, spontaneous, [...] responsiveness" (Fasteau 21) of a "kill-or-be-killed situation" as the survivalist source through which men can feel most "profoundly alive," and, if they pass its tests, "most profoundly masculine" (Fasteau 148). Ed and the others, then, take on the "primal test" (Fasteau 144) of the wilderness precisely because they trust that a "renewed feel of all the elements" (*DL* 135) may allow for the recovery of a suppressed body of masculinity that has too long been buried beneath the "endless hassles" of corporate capitalism (8). For Lewis especially, the therapeutic value of hunting and killing a 'real' deer, "after so much shooting at paper images of one" (4), tenders the very "last chance" (38) of delivery from what Theda Wrede describes as a "modern existence" of "burdensome and effeminizing complication" (Wrede 181). In Lewis' mind, he and the other 'city boys' are significantly "lesser men" (41) when compared with the country mountain dwellers; whose blistering existence principally "depends on *having* to survive," and thereby epitomises the tough frontiering core of the wilderness (38). Declaring that, "life is so fucked-up right now, and so complicated," that he wouldn't mind if it "came down, right quick, to the bare survival of who was ready to survive" (*DL* 37), Lewis purposely sets out to "test his own endurance" by emotionally, if not violently, "immersing himself in nature" (Wrede 181). What is so key about this masculinist "survival craze," however, is the way in which Dickey skilfully supplants a very temporally specific - marked in Lewis' use

of “right now” - and highly politicised discourse on male ‘liberation’ with a biologicistic treatise on ‘survival’ (*DL* 37). That which is a contemporaneous conflict concerning male and female sexual politics in the late sixties therefore gets “rewritten” into an ahistorical, apolitical battle of “evolutionary imperatives,” effectually mapping that interminable struggle between the “primitive and civilised aspects of dominant masculinity” (Robinson 155).

Certainly, throughout the narrative, the “sensation of the water’s raging” (*DL* 68) on the Cahulawassee River stands in as both a physical, as well as “supernatural source,” through which the masculine body must potently prove itself to attain an organically virile delivery (195). Drawing on Theweleit’s *Male Fantasies*, water is the substance that bears natural “redemptive qualities,” by means of which the male should then “immerse himself to be reborn” (422). As Lewis tells Ed, “you’ve been steady [with] all that office furniture in front of you, [but] when that river is under you, all that is going to change. There’s nothing you can do as vice-president of Emerson-Gentry that’s going to make any difference at all, when the water starts to foam up” (*DL* 35). Prior to the trip, Ed had essentially been languishing inside a “walled-in” hall, that was “inside a larger hall” (*DL* 13), ultimately reducing the “sound of the river,” that is the spiritual calling of nature, to merely a distant “something heard through a door” (106). Since women and feminism are, too, already firmly located on the civilisation side of this door, the “current thread” (177) of the water connotes an antithetically male “primal energy” (195), figuratively flowing forth against women so that men believe they have “dipped into” a pure and native manhood away from any existing suggestions of femininity or domesticity (195). Accordingly “tanked up” with this “river-mystique,” the alignment of water with masculinity provides Dickey’s men with the assurance that they will “go through some fantastic change” as soon as they “dig the paddle in the first time” (45). Women, on the other hand, having the status of purveyor of contemporaneous societal values, remain primary “reminders” of that from which “purifying water [...] rescued the male,” as well as that against which an original, autonomous masculinity may be shown, and so ultimately revived (Theweleit 422).

With no other element possessing such a natural “means of purification” as water does for men, Theweleit furthermore contends the “enormously heightened significance of water” with regard to post-war masculinity; as an abstract, yet inevitably “ideological as well as political weapon,” against the historical emergence of an unfettered female sexuality (Theweleit 422). In keeping with this, Ed’s wife Martha, as the only relatively noted woman in the text, is tellingly eliminated from the central plot almost immediately after a sexual encounter. The implication here is that women, with their newly liberated and “practical approach to sex” (*DL* 23), embody a stagnant reservoir of superfluous traits, no longer appropriate to “radically new personality,” or the “Adamic character” of the new wild man being (re)born (Lewis 5). To this end, Carolyn Heilbrun determines *Deliverance* as an “apotheosis of the theme of manliness in America fiction,” her definition of the classic American novel being itself a territory where “women do not go, where civilisation cannot reach, where men hunt one another like animals and hunt animals for sport” (Heilbrun 41). Indeed, to allow for the homosocial bonds of masculinity to truly regenerate, Ed and the others seek to offset concurrent cultural changes by wholly extricating themselves from the emasculating seductions of women; and, in the male company of each other, find release from domesticity by venturing “out of the sleep of mild people,” and “into the wild rippling water” (*DL* 31). Their hunt for masculine renascence fittingly takes the form of this primeval canoe trip to the rural South, wherein their encounter with the water – which forces each man to “move with the most intimate motions of [his] body, motions [he] had never dared use [...] with any other human woman” (*DL* 151) – functions as a “sublimated release of sexual energies” into regenerative violence (Theweleit 422).

Of course, by way of displacing sexual politics with socio-biology as the explanatory model, this naturalist approach to the masculine crisis respectively obviates any requirement to repress or remodel male determinants in relation to contemporary feminist critique. Instead, Dickey is permitted to freely espouse nature and the lexicon of natural law so as to justify the uninhibited release of an essentially primal masculinity allegedly free from the social. What is more, through literarily exercising this remedial return to nature,

Dickey enables the narrative to move beyond its temporal locality towards an exploration into much broader cultural concerns regarding mainstream conceptions of American masculinity. At the heart of these conceptions is the myth of the frontier, which has come to rest upon what Mitchell deems, “a sense of masculine innocence and manly virtues,” thereby implying nostalgia for any moment where traditional definitions of masculinity have been usurped by the capitalist forces of modern society (27). As Mitchell states, the frontier represents a “geomythical space” marking the cusp between the “perceived limitations of contemporary historical realities” and the “democratic utopia” of the American imagination (19). Analogously, Ed observes how “the change was not gradual,” that whilst journeying away from the concrete materiality of the metropolis he could have “stopped the car and got out at the exact point where suburbia ended and the red-neck south began” (*DL* 32). It is this idea of the frontier as an autonomous, atemporal ‘point’ that in effect “takes him from railroad car and puts him in the birch canoe” (Turner 4). Namely, it is that which straightaway “strips off the garments of civilisation and arrays him in the hunting shirt and the moccasin” (Turner 4). Basically, it is a place where none – or almost none – of [Ed’s] daily ways of living [his] life would work,” and with no “no habit [he] could call on” (*DL* 79), the wilderness convinces him that here, “we were not – or at least I was not - what we were before” (*DL* 30). The desire inherent to this wilderness endeavour, that is, the de-historicised male desire symbolised by the frontier, is, therefore, not simply the ideological longing for a material ‘thing,’ but more so, it is the need to “form an identity” (Mitchell 19). In this respect, Dickey’s novel highlights how crisis leads to the resurrection of intransigently transparent models of American manhood, as the men’s masculinist prospects are essentially shaped by the wilderness motif and the visionary Adamic archetypes it tabulates.

The sense of crisis and the return to Adamic “primal perfection” as male tonic, naturally constructs masculinity as a necessary defensive, reactive identity formation, always looking to recoup its power, and for men to remasculinize themselves in traditional ways (Mitchell 3). Typically, these masculine conducts tend to correlate most strongly with

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patterns of violence, so as to allow men to get “out of the rut for a while” by “breaking the pattern” they are so socially accustomed to, and reconnecting with the authentic physicality of their own bodies through subjugating the bodies of ‘others’ (*DL* 31). As we have already noted, however, the sixties-era political movements largely discredited the patriarchal authority enshrining these violent ideals, consequently forcing white men to re-establish the coordinates of male violence by physically turning against themselves through nature. David Savran explains how this transposition of the topography of masculinity to the surrogate frontier of the natural body became “hegemonic in the seventies” because it reflected an instinctual masculinist orientation to “respond to and regroup in the face of particular social and economic challenges” (5). Dickey’s utilisation of what is then termed, “reflexive masochism,” whereby the white male actively subjugates his body to “sadistic forces within his own ego,” thus denotes a bid by modern men such as Ed and Lewis to “stamp out” any vulnerable and abject associations within themselves, so that they may, in turn, relinquish “the fall into the feminine posed by the cultural moment” (Savran 38). Though, by definition, the masochist assumes a passive and so ‘feminine’ position, in relation to an alternately active and so ‘masculine’ person, Kaja Silverman makes clear how the reflexive masochist “occupies both sadist and masochist positions,” and in so doing succeeds to “consolidate the male ego even as it seems to dismantle it” (1988 327). Indeed, because reflexive masochism does not call for the “renunciation of activity” (Silverman, 1988 326), but rather employs this “self-system” (*DL* 120) of violence as a “prerequisite for extreme [manliness],” it not only enables the male subject to give way to masochistic pleasure without “compromising” his autonomy by depending on another human being (Silverman, 1988 326), but furthermore conforms to this idea of the self reliantly defined American Adam, who is forever “standing alone” on the brink with nothing more than “his own unique and inherent resources” (Lewis 5).

Serving as their own sadistic punishers with their own integral armaments, Dickey’s male protagonists are free to “indulge an appetite for pain without at the same time calling into question any virility” (Silverman, 1988 327). It had been “so many years” since these

men had been “really hurt,” that the feeling is “almost luxurious” (*DL* 180). The “pain itself” becomes “freedom,” reawakening them to a primal masculinity so far removed from any socially constructed definitions of gender they evade the feminisation which would, in another context, be produced by such wounds (168). Because Lewis’ anxiety is that he is “only an image of manhood,” it certainly makes sense that his “virile suffering” should affirm he is, in fact, “an embodiment of manhood” (Barnett 155). Naturally, after having been so consumed by the ephemeral pleasures of late capitalism, the coarse reality of “feeling dirt on [his] hands” soon reacquaints Lewis with the raw tangibility of the body “for the first time in years” (60). His exposure to, and reflexive subsistence of, the abstract forces of the terrain – notably described as being “rougher than a night in jail in South Georgia” – is hence key to his remasculinization, as the physical labour of survival delivers the dominant device for experiencing the frontier fantasy as ‘real’ (*DL* 47).¹⁸ However, the survivalist impulse on which this authenticity is based is somewhat subsequently brought into question by the fact that Lewis’ impulses towards physical effort are always essentially tied to his distinct “fanaticism about pre-paredness” (*DL* 40). The necessity to strategically rehearse extreme scenarios - to forever know where to go “when the radios died, when there was nobody to tell you where to go” (*DL* 37) - in truth, underscores Lewis’ masochistic fantasy as a specific “mise-en-scène,” in which “anticipation is crucial” (Barnett 48).¹⁹ Moreover, it bespeaks his primary psychological desire to “set the scene” (Barnett 48), to pre-emptively position himself into a particular masculinist tableau where he can knowingly “grit his teeth and take his punishment like man” so as to assume the awaited role of Adamic hero (Savran 176). What turns out, then, to be a fundamentally contrived and performative process, implies he who takes it “*like* a man” does so because he can never truly “*be* a man” (Savran 176).

¹⁸ Here Dickey disconcertingly equates survival in this rough wilderness to avoiding the ultimate emasculating event of jailhouse sodomy. By metaphorically alluding to sodomy, Dickey not only sets up the geography of the male body against the geography of the land, but also artfully foreshadows the defining male rape scene of the novel.

¹⁹ “Mise-en- scène” (“placing on stage”) is an expression used to describe the design aspects of a theatre or film production. In this case, it refers to Lewis’ stylization of the wilderness experience as a prop to influence the verisimilitude of his masculine performance in both the eyes of the other men, as well as those of the reader.

Haunted by feelings of such inadequacy and suspecting the masquerade of his own maleness, Ed similarly fixates on this belief that by “acting [...] out” (*DL* 149) all the things he thinks real men “are “supposed to [do]” (*DL* 30) - or “so said the archery magazines” (*DL* 27) - perhaps he may too end up actually ‘being’ the thing his masculinist “costume” represents (*DL* 30). Instead of making “some sort of excuse” so that he could “take off [his] costume,” specifically his wilderness gear, Ed therefore keeps it on in the belief that if he can simply satisfy the essentialist “idea and the image” of participating in violent activity, respectively he may allow for the possibility of actually ‘becoming’ (*DL* 30). As Jacques Derrida explains in his critical reformulation of performativity, the power of the subject is not in the function of an originating will, but is always derivative. For him, if a performative professionally succeeds, it is not because an intention successfully governs the action, but only because that action “echoes prior actions,” and accumulates the force of authority through the “citation of a prior and authoritative set of practices” (Derrida 20). What this means, then, is Ed’s virile performance ‘works’ to the extent that it draws on and covers over the constitutive conventions by which it is mobilised; namely those distinctly monolithic patriarchal practices.

Thus, when Robinson claims Ed is “remasculinized in the woods having incorporated the experience of violence into his body,” she is not so much wrong, but strictly speaking fails to identify the way in which Dickey - through submitting “natural strength and imaginative fluency [...] as a bodily essence of maleness” (Robinson 165) - deliberately naturalises “the will of a masculine authority” so as to counteract the equivocation of the signs of masculinity (Derrida 21). Indeed, by essentialising the venerated masculinity, Dickey demonstrates how reflexive theory omits the fact that the signifiers of masculinity are, on the one hand, “never truly fixed,” and, on the other, credited at such an inaccessible level “away from the social forces that would necessarily distort them” (Mitchell 8). In his fronting of an American masculinity as defined by the logic of the American hero, Dickey artfully profiles the Adamic frontiersman as a self-imposed “performative structure,” subconsciously manipulated to “negate the diachrony of American history” in favour of a

“radical synchrony” that demands mastery over the “entire constitutive practices of American cultural identity” (Mitchell 5). To commit to the Adamic belief as Ed and Lewis do is, as a result, to fashion an “ideological space” in which a specific type of violent masculine performance transpires as the quintessential American identity (Mitchell 6).

To this end, their ‘masculinity,’ as such, does not reside in the male body, but rather in a series of performative gestures and public penetrations. Hence, when Ed catches a “glimpse of [himself] in the rear window” of the car, (*DL* 60), his hands “holding the bow,” he feels “steadied” by the character pose, and begins to believe: “I would do what I had come to do, in this kind of deadly charade” (162). Ed’s sense of masculine conviction derives this way from the associative “image” of himself as an archetypal “tall forest man, an explorer, guerrilla, hunter” (60), subsequently stressing his ultimate “compliance with [the] command” of the macho master ‘script’ (Derrida 21). Of course, this ‘compliance with’ also works as a ‘response to’ “*Che vuoi?*” (what do you want from me?), so as to further appease the desires of the hegemonic masculine order. As Slavoj Žižek explains, “to fill out the unbearable gap of *Che vuoi?*,” that is, “the opening of the Other’s desire,” the male must effectively offer himself “to the Other as the object of its desire” (1989 129). Ed’s envisioning of himself as the ideal male ego - in the same way as Lewis at the start of the novel - thus occurs from the commanding “perspective of the Other” (Žižek, 1989 144). This continued emphasis on vision, that is, on Ed needing to “see” himself as perceptibly figured with the bow, equally suggests that, in order to “live up to equipment” (*DL* 30), he need only really “make some show” of doing what he said he had come for (80). Ed explains that:

All I had really wanted was to stay away a reasonable length of time, long enough for the others to wake and find me gone – I thought of just sitting down on the bank of the ravine and waiting for half an hour by my watch – and then walk back into camp with my bow strung and say I’d been out taking a look around. That would satisfy honor (80-1).

The politics of this is particularly interesting because, as “hunting and pretending to hunt come together” in Ed’s mind - to the point he “could not now tell them apart” – Dickey ultimately underscores the significant lack underlying the masculine performance (80). For Ed, the implied connotation of hunting seems enough to “satisfy” the Adamic “honor” of the male symbolic order, as evident in the way he additionally took his “unstrung bow and hung it on a branch to make the spot look like a *real* hunting camp” (73; emphasis added). Ironically, however, the ‘reality’ of this equation - between the lived experience and its tacit intimation - indicates a missing signification or absence at the heart of the masculine mystique. The men’s wilderness fantasy, in this way, emerges as a means to mask the void, purposefully staging a basic homosocial scenario wherein the essential impotence of the myth of masculinity can then be camouflaged. Referring back to Lacan, “fantasy is a construction” whose task it is to “veil the lack [...] effected by castration” (1977 133). It is an “imaginary involved in a signifying function,” a signifying that subsequently “fills out” the “empty space” left by the “lack in the Other” (Lacan, 1977 126). With the modern male condition primarily marked by its quest for the lost frontier, the fantasy of primeval retreat proceeds, then, to promise Dickey’s men “an encounter with this precious jouissance,” a reunification that is fantasised as “covering over the lack in the Other and, consequently, as filling the lack in the subject” (Lacan, 1983 133).

In this sense, though the fanciful frontiersman image of Ed “might have looked a little posed or phony,” it is suitably “different from what any mirror could show” (*DL* 147). It is by way of this visionary narcissism that Ed, in truth, imposes an aesthetic order as a means to control his masculine anxieties, for “if it were not for [him],” the “arrangement [...] would not be like it is” (14). That is to say, Ed apprehends the primal setting as his own self-fashioned screen, and it is this “effect of framing” (19) that allows him to “have it as I wish,” the same way he would in a “layout for an ad” (147). Markedly, Ed thinks himself free to see only the “reflection” he demands “back from the mirror,” which saves him from facing the “Real as abyss” (Mitchell 13). Of course, such denial of any male ‘loss’ by means of this ultimately compensatory, if not desperate attesting to masculine power, nevertheless

still evidences the experience of castration. As Žižek argues, the “more violent” one’s reaction, the more he “confirms a fundamental impotence,” that is the “logic of phallic inversion” (1989 157). The men’s ideological fantasy of the American Adam - defined by Mitchell as a “materialization of the phallus” (Mitchell 8) - thus becomes a prosthetic “signifier of castration” (Žižek, 1989 157) - or “aluminum shaft” (*DL* 101) - for the precise reason that its remunerative manifestation, whilst working to mask its own masculine absence, actually accentuates this lack of presence. It is, thus, important to recognize that in destabilizing the ideal of Adamic perfection like so, Dickey does not “move away from violence,” but rather succeeds to “unleash the beast” that has inevitably always “lurked alongside the ideal” (Mitchell 15). Instead of a visibly discernable “lack,” there is, therefore, this hypermasculine “inflated presence” that continues to “protrude in undesirable ways” (Mitchell 8). This is made most disturbingly apparent when Ed and Bobby come face to face with primitive powers they originally set out to find; namely, that base “creature” they had “always contained but never released” (*DL* 124).

In both its novel and filmic form, *Deliverance* is, unsurprisingly, most often remembered for the “unthinkably ridiculous and humiliating” male rape scene at its centre, in which Bobby is forced to “scream” and “squall” (102) like a pig as he is sodomized by one of two toothless ‘Bootlegger’ mountain men, so clichéd in character, they “looked like [hillbillies] in some badly cast movie” (47). Watched all the while by Ed who has been tied to a tree “so tight” he can “hardly breathe” (95), the politics of this scene - of Ed’s “rectum and intestines [contracting]” as “the white-haired man worked steadily on Bobby” (98) - certainly qualifies Dickey’s novel as a work that is centrally concerned with masculinity, but one which nonetheless exceeds any prevailing or straightforward narrative of the white American male body as being physically violated or victimized in the post-sixties era. Indeed, associating anal penetration with passivity and femininity, but also ultimately with death, Leo Bersani compelling argues that the rectum is a “grave,” within which the “masculine *ideal* of proud subjectivity is buried” (220; emphasis added). By inverting the straight and ‘steady’ upward trajectory of masculine physical labour and offering, in its

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place, a degraded version of the 'working' male body bent down "on the ground" exercising in a violent rectal gravity (*DL* 98), Dickey thus sardonically styles the rape in terms of an assault on, or fragmentation of, "the sacrosanct value of selfhood that sexual jouissance achieves" (Bersani 222). In other words, rather than metaphorically elaborating what many contemporaneous middle-class men experienced as a metaphysical condition, namely, that sense of loss figured as emasculation in the modern world, the novel masterfully invokes the rectum as an abject symbol for the fundamental bankruptcy of the mythic quest for frontier masculinity; which is ominously insinuated in the way the rapist claims: "This-here river don't go nowhere" (*DL* 93). In truth, the author exaggerates the homo-sexualised "brutality and carelessness of touch," that total "disregard for another person's body" (96) as exhibited by the "sick-looking" rapists (92) - and wholly counter to Ed's complete admiration of Lewis - so as to essentially ironize the premise of a potent self-verification and authorial masculine 'regeneration' through wild - "And I *mean* wild" - virile violence (1).

Now "wasted with pain," Bobby's "ass" thereby emerges as the grotesque embodiment of the dividing "line or border" between civilisation and savagery that exemplifies the frontier fantasy of "going deeper and deeper" into the wilderness, "trying to reach a point" (102, 21). It is interesting to note in this regard that the most famous line of Boorman's film, wherein Bobby is told to "squeal like a pig," is absent from the original text. This is noteworthy because the decision to incorporate this overt statement into the film suggests the covert significance of Bobby's association with "domestic pigs" and "wild hogs" in the novel (49), which is propitious in light of Peter Stallybrass and Allon White's engaging Bakhtinian cultural history of the pig. For Stallybrass and White, the pig is an intensely ambiguous creature that confounds social boundaries and categorisations. Specifically, it is "the site of competing definitions and desires" that often "overlapped with," and "confusingly debased," the demarcation between human and beast in classical reason:

Not only did the pink pigmentation and apparent nakedness of the pig disturbingly resemble the flesh of European babies (thereby transgressing the man-animal opposition), but pigs were usually kept in peculiarly close proximity to the house and fed from the household's leftovers. In other words, pigs were *almost*, but not quite, members of the household and they *almost*, but not quite, followed the dietary regimes of humans. [...] Its mode of life was not different from, but alarmingly imbricated with the forms of life which betokened civility (47).

It is precisely the ambivalence of the pig, "at the intersection of a number of important cultural and symbolic thresholds," which makes it the "object of fear and fascination," and so "a useful animal to think with" (Stallybrass and White 47). Certainly, throughout the text, Dickey makes several allusions to Bobby's "plump and pink" hairless body, and "how high his voice was when he screamed" (*DL* 97, 110). It is through this porcine characterisation that Dickey then confirms the novel's deeply felt unease about the hybrid intermingling of the seeming incompatibilities of nature and culture. The fact they menacingly merge "together in the flesh there on the floor of the woods," moreover affirms that American 'civilisation,' and its masculinity and classist attitudes in particular, necessarily subsists on the threshold or border of its opposite (*DL* 155); but by "getting so near" the object of their desired 'deliverance,' and "attempting to penetrate the impenetrable object" (Mitchell 19), Ed, Lewis, Bobby and Drew ensue to open up the vacuous and abject underside to the "whole careful structure" of an imperious masculine ideology, inevitably causing the fabric of the fantasy underpinning the belief "to come apart" (*DL* 165).

According to Donald Greiner, Dickey's protagonists "fall short" in their search for masculine deliverance "not because they are more realistically imagined," but because the national culture of the sixties and seventies "will not longer sustain the illusion of the ideal" (20). The intensely rugged mountain men, therefore, surface in the excesses of trying to attain that which is an unattainable heroic masculinity. For Mitchell, this failure to achieve brings with it a concomitant "fear and paranoia" that rings with the cries of "*Corruption! Sabotage!*" (20). Such 'fear and paranoia' desperately insists, that is, on the existence of the

sort of external enemy threats epitomised by the rapists' random violence. As Mitchell explains, however, "fear and paranoia are not simply the result of the attempt to cross the frontier to become the American Adam," but rather, "they are a part of the very condition of the national psychosis" (20). In other words, these "awful-looking men" are not just a grotesque effect of this belief in primitive regeneration, but are always already built into the very structure of the Adamic desire supporting the belief (*DL* 215).

To this end, Dickey reconfigures Ed and Bobby's violation as a response to, and consequence of, their own compliant and conformist, other-directed servitude to the outdated orthodoxies and learned expectations of a degenerated masculine discourse. In insinuating that the American male is "willing to let anything be done to him," Dickey undermines any sense of a sovereign or self-ruling search for authentic masculine selfhood; underscoring, instead, the extent to which his male protagonists are effectually being suffocated and raped by their obedience to a set of culturally manipulated mythic masculine ideals, practices and beliefs in a process that mimics the wider consumer capitalist politics of commodified individualism and free choice (110). This is powerfully depicted in the way Ed, when told to "back up to that saplin," seemingly of his own volition "picked out a tree" to be bound to and, turning to his attackers for confirmation asks - "This one?" - before backing up the tree he had "selected" (95). By freely 'choosing' a tree to be paradoxically restrained by, the politics of this scene symbolically accentuate the extent to which Ed's apparently individual resolution is always just a reflection of the social model within which he is contained, and his existential 'freedom' just the systematically fixed cultural construction ciphred beneath a pretence of 'choice' within postwar American society. As Linda Ruth Williams points out, however, it is the deliberately "collective disavowal" of this disillusioning knowledge that warrants the continuing ability of white masculinity as an ideological discourse to make itself over into any politically and culturally marketable image (9).

Of course, one way mythologies retain their power is by declaring themselves outside of form, or else, by setting themselves up as naturalised and eternalised. So one

reason why Dickey's men seek to make the events in the woods "unhappen" (*DL* 181) - by killing the rapists and sinking their bodies in the river, "forever" (190) - is not merely due to the feminising shame of the rape but rather, more significantly, because American manhood, like American history itself, is systemically invested in the maintenance of those binding 'civilised,' imperialist mythologies that enable "pioneers" to transcend the violence in which they engage and emerge as heightened heroes (70-2). The fact Drew is killed in the process, however, and buried along with the other bodies, denotes the self-destructive fault lines of imperialist masculinity, which are founded on the repression - as metaphorically figured through buried male bodies - of America's foundation of genocidal displacement and denial. To prevent anything from "assaulting [his] story" (224), Ed must therefore trust his "lies" to be ever "more and more like truth," so as to ensure the "bodies in the woods and in the river did not move" and shake the always already unstable base on which American masculine mythology sustains itself (220). In the novel's conclusion Ed claims that, "to this day," he could not "remember if it really happened," inferring "it might have been just a trick of perspective or darkness" (54). This is largely due to his mythologization of the crime as typified in his story to the county police:

I made it a point to try to visualise the things I was saying as though they had really happened. I could see us searching for Drew, though we never had. I saw these things happen [...] as I talked; it was hard to realise that they had not taken place in the actual world; as I saw him taking them into account, they became part of a world, the believed world, the world of recorded events, of history (204).

Here Dickey allegorises the extent to which the masculine need for a national origin story obstructed the recognition of the true nature of the historical processes. He furthermore highlights how the very complex relations of American frontier history were reduced to a managed set of mythically glossed images that nevertheless became the 'actual,' 'believed' and thereby officially 'recorded' history of the nation. Thus, when the author describes *Deliverance* as a novel about "how decent men kill," Dickey is referring to the way in which

the protagonists are able to rationalise the crime by deriving the murderous act of its conventional associations and making it 'decent' (1970 13). In truth, however, Ed statement, "I killed him, and I'd kill him again, only better," is the grossest manifestation of a capitalist improvement continuum, and the relentless insatiability that keeps consumerism in perpetual motion (182). This logic of civilised 'decency' consequently mirrors that repeatedly used by American society to justify the killing of Native Americans in its expansion westward into new frontiers, as well as the enslavement of African Americans that effectively consolidated the nation's colonial and capitalist wealth. Importantly, however, Dickey destabilises the impervious status of white men as "the law" (221) by disclosing the fraudulent frontiers of the Adamic archetype that traditionally held, but now traumatically haunts, the American masculine psyche, along with its abject legacy of capitalist residue epitomised in the "texture" of the river; which was "full of vomit, the chunks of steak and all the stuff we had brought from the city" (181). Dickey's male characters, to this end, are always at the mercy of a set of nebulous masculine expectations based in landscapes whose meanings have shifted and whose fulfilment is thereby impossible; and it is not doubt here, "at the heart of Lewis Medlock country" (138), that you will find "more human bones than anybody'll ever know" (111).

Chapter Three

“With a violence born of total helplessness”:

Jane, Dick, and the Deterministic Denial of the Black American Male in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*

“The only thing they will not stand for is for a Black man to be a man. And everything else is worthless if a man can’t be a man.”

John O. Killens, *And Then We Heard the Thunder* (1963 180)

Toni Morrison - when critically accused of devising ineffectual female victims, monstrously castrating women, and perversely psychotic men - retorts that black women have always borne their crosses “extremely well,” and “everybody knows, deep down, that black men were emasculated by white men, period [...], [and] that black women didn’t take any part in that” (Step 384). Morrison’s contemporaneous review of black American masculinity, to this end, suggests that not only have black men “successfully retained their special vitality in spite of white male resistance,” but also, like Susan Neal Mayberry argues, that their constructive “connections to black women” have ultimately “saved their lives” (1). Thus, while many of her literary works across the past half-century seem as much a tribute to the remarkable coping strategies of black men, specifically, as a lament for their bouts of self-destruction, Morrison’s assessment of African American masculinity must be conjoined further with her idea of the feminine, at the same time as her form of feminism aligns her with a tradition that refuses to exclude the masculine. Indeed, given that associations between black men and black women in America have been historically different from the majority of their white counterparts, it is important to recognise the way in which Morrison’s fiction deliberately refuses to elevate “gender above race or race above gender” so as to reveal the “remarkable resilience of the African American community” as a whole (Mayberry 8). In this sense, Jane Davis contends that Morrison’s writing exhibits a preoccupation that extends beyond the individual “relationships of black men and black

women,” and significantly more towards the social “axes on which those relationships frequently turn” (419).

Morrison’s treatment of her male characters – as in the work of her formerly undervalued predecessor, Zora Neale Hurston – becomes, as such, key to her success in countering the concurrent trends and temptations of exclusionary feminism without losing the truths upon which such feminism is fundamentally based. In fact, her first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), can be read in terms of what Mayberry describes as its creator’s “masculine manifesto” (15). Notably it is here that Morrison courageously connects her black male characters with the most abhorrent crimes against nature, including rape, incest, and paedophilia, and yet simultaneously urges the reader to forgive them by contextualising their violent corruption in terms of white western tenets of “sexual repression, competitive ownership, and physical beauty” (Mayberry 14). Morrison’s male characters, in “their contempt for their own blackness” (*TBE* 65), are consequently construed with respect to their participation in a larger, historically racist culture, and thwarted in any self-realisation or racial consciousness by the socially inculcated needs and desires they have incorporated into their own dispossessed egos; including the monolithic prescription of a white American masculinity. Morrison’s literary vision of masculinity anticipates, then, the ‘womanist’ insight first conceived by Alice Walker, in which relationships between African American men and African American women must be understood not only in terms of the intersections of gender and race, but also with respect to their distinct experience and participatory “knowledge that [they] did not belong there,” within the wider white American, patriarchal culture (*TBE* 82).²⁰

In order to consider black masculinity in *The Bluest Eye* it is therefore necessary to establish some understanding of this cultural position or predicament, and the historical context of black American men. This is a difficult and challenging task to accomplish succinctly, partly owing to the huge and complex nature of the subject on which much has

²⁰ Alice Walker first coined the term “womanism” in her 1979 short story, “Coming Apart.” Later, in her 1983 essay, “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens,” Walker famously stated, “womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender” (409).

been written, involving history, culture, politics and literature. Nevertheless, some attempt must be made to situate the black men of Morrison's novel historically, so that they can be understood as products of that history in which Morrison's novel is, partly, dedicated to examining, as well as to dramatizing the consequences of. As a place to start, it is clear that myths, misconceptions, and more often than not destructive stereotypes concerning Black American masculinity historically have haunted US culture. Arguably, African American men have thus emerged as one of the most distraught, if not disturbed, fragments of contemporary American society. For Jewelle Taylor Gibbs, this is no doubt owing to the persistently paranoid and racially essentialised portrayal of Black males in American social, cultural, and political discourse as "hostile, sullen, brutal, and violent [...] victimisers" (128). By and large characterised as such, that is to say, as fundamentally "angry, alienated, aggressive and anti-social," the Black male has, according to Gibbs, respectively been rendered a maladjusted "nonentity" in virtually every major social institution across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (128).

Predetermined this way to be "non-achievers in schools, non-producers in the labour market, and non-participants in society," many black males are, then, prevented from self-sufficiency or self-determination by overwhelming racist images introjected into their psyches, which of course deciphers them, ironically, not as the "*victimisers*," but as the principal *victims* of society, "triply disadvantaged by race, poverty, and social isolation" (Gibbs 129). Thwarted in any attempts to find a way out of this enduringly marginalised position and into that of modern mainstream society, along with the struggle to cope constructively with their attendant feelings of frustration and rage, too many black males furthermore have resigned to drop out of the system completely by receiving this socially pathological image of their black selves, and deductively destroying themselves in a "vicious cycle of hostility, aggression, and violence" (Gibbs 132). Such self-destructive behaviour, be it in the form of crime, drugs, sexual violence or sullen withdrawal, cannot be simply assumed, therefore, as the deviant activities of an abject male minority, but must be valued more complexly as "symptomatic indicators of the historically devalued status of blacks in

American society” (Gibbs 129); namely, of the underlying economic poverty of the black family, the social and cultural disaffection of the black community, and the political disenfranchisement of the black male within a white supremacist, patriarchal nation.

Contemporaneous examinations of African American masculinity irrefutably confirm that adult black males have been, and continue to be, some of the most crucial casualties of the legacy of racial discrimination and prejudice in American society. Recounting the history of black masculinity as being reduced to the debased dimensions of “property, submissive, non-protective [...] [and] powerless,” Clyde Franklin explicates how, in early colonial America, “Black men were not [even considered] human, and thus it was impossible for them to be masculine” (273). Writing in the 1990s, Franklin thereby contends that, in order to sincerely “[understand] black masculinity,” it is important to first appreciate the extent to which, in America, “Black males have been ‘men’ for only about twenty years” (275). Indeed, even during the postwar phase of Civil Rights movement, the gradual recognition of Black males as ‘men’ in the late-sixties and seventies was nevertheless undercut by the concomitant perception of Black men as instinctually “aberrant,” and so inherently inept in securing any “societally approved [...] masculine role” (Franklin 275). The societal refusal to formerly extend the black male the power and privilege of his ‘manhood,’ or rather, its abiding negation of anything beyond the idea of Black male slave subhumanity, consequently foregrounds the “difficult and tedious social construction” implicated in acquiring the masculinity particular to black men, for it denotes the “numerous adaptations that must be made in a racist society” (Franklin 273). The cultural insecurity surrounding the contemporary Black American male sex role may be due, therefore, to the “legacy of a non-definition of the black male slave sex role,” and the chronic reluctance in postwar American culture to perceive the Black male as an effective ‘man’ - or at least in the “hegemonic sense of the word” (Franklin 276).

Of course, developments in black masculinities have a decidedly longer and richer legacy in America than just the past half-century or so. For William H. Grier and Price M. Cobbs, while the racial revolt in the 1960s was aimed directly at concurrent societal norms,

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laws, and customs proving to be deadly and humiliating for large numbers of black people, especially black men, its principle grew out of this history of “oppression and capricious cruelty” that is “interwoven with that of [the American nation],” and which can be seen, then, as “reflected in [the] daily life” of the contemporary black American male (1, 18). Displaced from their country, their tribes, and their families, the transportation of slaves from Africa to the New World in the early seventeenth century violently disrupted the historical development of the black-African people as they were confronted with an alien culture of white-European genesis. Whatever the nature of the two cultural systems “from which they came and to which they arrived,” and whatever their “capacity for adaptation,” Andrew Billingsley contends that the black population “were [never] free to engage in the ordinary process of acculturation” (48). Not only were they “cut off from their previous culture,” wherein they had been “free, independent human beings,” but furthermore were converted into “chattel,” and so denied the necessary permission to “develop and assimilate to the new culture in ways that were unfettered and similar to the opportunities available to other immigrant groups” (Billingsley 48). This process of dehumanisation started at the beginning of the slave gathering process and was intensified at each stage along the way, with the black American population growing progressively more “disengaged from their cultures, their families, and their humanity,” while firmly ingrained within the white American population flourished a “crippling sense of superiority” (Billingsley 50).

Though the civilisation that tolerated such slavery may have “dropped its slaveholding cloak” over a century ago, the inner posture of racial superiority endured throughout modern America, “unabated in thoughts, feelings, and intimidation” (Grier & Cobbs 19). For this reason, Harry Kitano verifies the conditions of slavery as being the “single most important experience for [race relations] in the US” (106). He states that slavery’s dominance-submission pattern of ‘white-negro’ interrelationships formally “stamped both slave and slave owner with an indelible mark,” one so obscure it has proved “difficult to erase” from the minds of American citizens “even [after] the Emancipation

Proclamation [was] well over one hundred years old” (Kitano 106).²¹ The closed system of slavery in the US sure enough produced a caste-like set of relations between ‘white’ and ‘Negro,’ and the practices for upholding this dichotomous system of “human/subhuman, master/servant, adult/child, owner/owned,” according to Kitano, have evidently “survived in both overt and subtle forms,” so as to continue to confound the socio-economic distinctions between the races (Kitano 106). Helplessly “[harbouring] the wounds of yesterday,” the postwar American black man remains, therefore, at one end of a “psychological continuum that reaches back in time to his enslaved ancestors” (Grier & Cobbs 19). Indeed, with his mental mechanisms wrought by white supremacist neurosis - into that which is “compatible with a life of involuntary servitude” - the modern black American male effectually exhibits formerly “constricting adaptations” as inborn “character traits,” thereby highlighting a persistent attitude, imparted by black and white alike, that blacks are innately inferior on account of their physical blackness (Grier & Cobbs 24). To consider the psychic structure of the postwar American black man in this way, as having “altered little since slavery,” is, in turn, deeply significant, if not “deeply troubling” (Grier & Cobbs 19).

Various social forces which serve as both impediments to fuller development of Afro-American family life, as well as opportunity screens through which many black males have been able to aspire toward social achievement, contain within them this “legacy of slavery,” and are therein what Billingsley terms, “shadows of the plantation” (72). As already stated, these shadows have proven “long and resilient,” reaching into every aspect of contemporary black American life, but having a “particular impact on the family organisation,” along with the black male’s capacity for “stability and achievement” (Billingsley 72). Certainly, the legacy of the white man’s prerogatives to oppress the black man has “myriad ramifications in the behaviour and the personality structures of both white

²¹ On January 1, 1863, the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation formally ended slavery even though the Civil War continued to rage for a time after. Following the end of the war, a series of reconstruction acts, the Civil Rights Act of 1866, the Fourteenth Amendment, and the Fifteenth Amendment provided the opportunity for a new relationship between America and Black Americans. However, the relationship did not materialize due to American culture’s violence toward Blacks, as well as racist customs and practices that all but recreated and reinstitutionalized slavery.

and Negro men” right up into the 1960s (Billingsley 54). The basic tenets of what became known as ‘American masculinity,’ in truth, evolved “beyond the grasp of the [contemporaneous] black man,” consigning him, yet again, with no effective claims to “being a man” (Franklin 5). For Franklin, this is not difficult to fathom given that the model of masculinity in America had been “constructed by the patriarchal slave-master system” (5). The chronic sense of inferiority, vulnerability, and submission on account of one’s colour, results, then, in an obligatory cultural compliance from the present black male to passé white supremacist norms, and thereby a detachment from his own racial awareness and personal growth as a ‘black man.’ This subjective severance, needless to say, becomes so complete in the African American male that little, if any, trace of prior, and thus alternative, cultural sanctions for masculine behaviour and personality remain for the descendants of the first black American generation other than those that paradoxically replicate the hegemonic model.

It is, therefore, precisely this inherited patriarchal definition of masculinity that African American feminist, bell hooks, defines as the “primary genocidal [...] force [endangering] [contemporary] black male life” (2004 xiv). According to hooks, in order for black men to find effective ways to “see their selves and the lives of their brothers and sisters in struggle,” they must first “break the life-threatening choke-hold patriarchal masculinity imposes on [him]” and “create life sustaining views of a reconstructed black masculinity” (2004 xiv). This is, however, a tenuous task at best, given that mainstream writing about black masculinity, ensconced with the impact of patriarchy and sexism, continues to push the notion that “all black men need to do to survive [castration and emasculation] is to become better patriarchs” (hooks, 2004 xiv). The twentieth century certainly ushered in an impetus for a new definition of black masculinity, with such prominent black male figures as Langston Hughes, W.E.B. Du Bois and Alain Locke positively promoting, both separately and together throughout the twenties and thirties, “black male self-sufficiency, black self-determination, [...] black persistence, and, essentially, the American definition of black success” (Franklin 6). Du Bois and Locke, along with a many others of the period, in fact

succeeded to exhibit many of the traits “American society decreed American males needed to manifest in their social interactions” despite the societal “reticence to extend the black male the gender ‘man’ or ‘masculine’” (Franklin 6). Hughes however criticised these “so called midwives of the Harlem Renaissance,” arguing that such apparent accommodation to, and assimilation of, Eurocentric values and culture to achieve social equality was ineffectual in “illuminating the Negro condition in America,”²² given that in reality the lower-class majority of African Americans remained frustrated in their efforts to assume the male role, which was always ultimately reserved for white American males, exclusively, during the beginnings of the twentieth-century (Hughes 218). Of course, to explore the black male legitimately, like hooks argues, as a tangible subject of modern sociological study, requires distinguishing his diverse disposition and plurality of postures, whilst ultimately recognising the inadequacy of using such traditional white models of masculinity to study black men.

The development of men’s studies in the eighties and nineties is hence of relevance here, for it was through their active reconsideration of ‘the making of masculinity’ that Tim Carrigan, Bob Connell and John Lee aptly identified the “culturally exalted” form of American masculinity, that being the traditional hegemonic model Hughes originally disdained, as “actually [corresponding] to the actual character of a small number of men” (581). According to Carrigan et al., “there is a distance and a tension between collective ideal and actual lives” (592), with few, if any, males truly capable of tallying the “patriarchal dividend,” culturally prescribed picture of what it means to be a man within Western culture; specifically, a pillar of strength, independence, dominance, and restraint, and at once solely heterosexual, middle-class and white (579). To be “blunt about it,” this overly basic, or else bigoted, ideal male sex role, “does not exist,” but nonetheless has persisted to exalt a critical division between traditional hegemonic masculinity and various subordinated masculinities (Carrigan et al. 581). The way in which black American men have commonly corresponded to this overall power framework, as well as how they have constructed their various forms of

²² Quoted by Sandra West in *Langston Hughes* (2003), p. 162.

masculinity within it, thus transpires as a problematic concern in contemporaneous men's studies on account of the normative societal application of unattainable white male expectations to black male behaviour (Carrigan et al. 581, 592). In consequence of this correspondence it is therefore necessary to explore further the discrepancy between the larger men's movement - in response to which the academic discipline of men's studies emerged - and the African American male's incongruous (dis)placement within it.

Historically, the modern-day men's movement in the US grew out of the concerns of a 'small number' of white middle-class men regarding problems they in particular experienced following the onset of the women's movement in the late sixties and seventies. Such men felt vulnerable, vexed and victimised as it became increasingly difficult for them to perform their 'traditional' male sex roles in the face of feminist revolt. As a result of such feelings of social instability, antifeminist writers such as Richard Doyle, concerned with issues of male disadvantage, discrimination and, ultimately, "the rape of the male," advocated a masculinist backlash in a branch of the men's movement known as the 'men's rights movement' (Doyle 1). In contrast, the separate, yet concurrent 'men's liberation movement' made any early effort to examine critically the male sex role throughout the seventies and eighties. Authors such as Marc Feigen Fasteau in *The Male Machine* (1974), and Warren Farrell in *The Liberated Man* (1975), began to critique the traits, roles and expectations society assigned to men – that is, white men - solely on the basis of their biological characteristics as similar emblems of oppression to men themselves as to women. Noticeably absent from both these initial outlets, however, was the black man, who could not see the dysfunctions associated with contemporaneous masculinity, nor the somewhat extravagant middle-class issues raised by the men's liberation movement, as anything but a sociocultural 'white problem' completely extraneous to black men. Indeed, given the lack of "cultural, institutional, and interpersonal assimilation in America," which together account for the comprehensive societal barriers to black males' 'masculine' role assumptions, the men's movement was felt by the black male to have "little or no relevance for the lives of black men" (Franklin 11). It was in direct response to this that specialised studies of African

American masculinity emerging in the late eighties and nineties began to then explore in detail the marginalised position of ethnic masculinities in terms of the oppressive and excluding power of hegemonic masculinity, with writers such as Franklin, Gibbs, and hooks, along with Carrigan et al, revealing exactly how such white-supremacist, masculinist ideologies have continually served as the external factor affecting black men's social pathologies.

Hazel Carby, too, clarifies the extent to which ideologies of masculinity “always exist in a dialectical relation to other ideologies,” and it is through this development of black American male studies that she, along with numerous other critics and authors of that period and after, are able to then focus upon articulating ‘masculinity’ within the discourses of “race and nation in American culture” so as to attempt to present an accurate portrait of the black male living in a white society (Carby 2). Typically, black males becoming men in America undergo a primary group socialising influence that instils in them the state values of freedom, democracy, competitive individualism, and equality of opportunity, which are altogether felt to be the “integral” aspects of the “[American] nation and [its] masculinity” (Carby 38). Although evidently ‘ideal’ rather than ‘real,’ these key values are all the same apportioned as cultural principles, and it is in relation to this institutional indoctrination that Billingsley ascertains the African American population as having been routinely “excluded from active and equal participation in [virtually all] of [the] major [systems] of [white America],” yet all the while remaining “heavily influenced by them” (6). The black male, “brainwashed by the sea of whiteness which surrounds [...] and defines [him],” in this sense, is not only denied full participation in American society on account of his being black and therefore ‘unacceptable,’ but is deprived of the faculty to define himself, as either a man or as a person of African descent, without the racist stereotypes the larger society imposes upon him (Billingsley 10).

Most black men amid this “process of becoming gendered beings” in America logically “suffer from a [...] political and sexual [...] deformation,” the result of which is their “patriarchal subordination in the national community” (Carby 33). They are, moreover,

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habitually interdependent on this prejudice process of black male societal conditioning irrespective of its passively proscriptive instruction; that is, what he, as a black male, *is not* allowed to do, in proportion to what the active white man supposedly *is* doing. Franklin congruently describes this “reluctance to teach black males directly what they should do as men in society” as further evidence of the “reluctance to accept black males as men on a level with other recognised men in American society” (14). To do so would of course be to recognise the “various masculinities of black men,” and, in turn, some “alterations in hegemonic definitions of masculinity” (Franklin 15). The socialising procedures by which Black masculinities have been so conspicuously shaped are, for this reason, indubitably provocative, precisely because it is the very masculine models to which they previously were subordinated that black men tend to seek, and the formerly “white [masters] who have vested interests in supporting the hegemonic model” that continue to head the cultural organisations (Franklin 277).

It must be emphasised, therefore, that while a militant civil rights struggle may have led to new ways of knowing, those ways of knowing were “systematically ignored by elites within the power structure” (hooks, 2004 11). It so becomes clear that the “root of white supremacy” was “not ignorance,” but rather what hooks recognises as a “desire on the part of “unenlightened white people” to maintain a covert psychological, but nevertheless absolute, “dominance over black people in the US” (2004 11). What this means, then, is black males are continually negotiating their masculinities from positions of external powerlessness, if not internal subservience. Indeed, whereas the white man regards his ‘manhood’ as an ordained right, “settled at birth by the possession of a penis and a white skin,” the black man cyclically engages in a “never-ending battle for its possession” (Grier & Cobbs 49). Notably, the black men who struggle most to “feel [their] [manhood] is [their] own” are those men who have declared allegiance to patriarchy and so, with a deep consciousness of personal inferiority, self-hatred and self-rejection, completely absorbed white-supremacist definitions of masculinity (Grier & Cobbs 49). The complexity of this subject, of what happens when, according to Davis, “the white image – of blacks – invades the black mind” (106),

subsequently portends that the black man who “[measures himself] against the norm” will also always “be less than a man,” for he cannot but, by his very nature, fail to fulfil the phallocentric masculine ideal as it has been articulated in white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy (hooks, 2004 14). The “composite portrait” of black masculinity that has emerged across the modern American imagination is, as such, consistently that of “inferiorised identity” and maladjusted manhood (Davis 107).

For the black male, this socially peripheral African American presence no doubt constitutes a grave psychological burden, as he is denied any active making of meaning in society, whilst also existing in emotional exile from his black self as well as from other blacks. What is more, within this recognisably “dissociative [state] black men often inhabit,” they are compelled to either imitate the actions of their oppressors, or to completely reject the racial identities and histories that have contributed to their imposed and internalised sense of inferiority (hooks, 2004 96). This “pseudo-choice” commonly leads to an oscillation between the two, which is most clearly translated into acts of “intra-racial hostility and violence” that are, of course, “manifestations of interactive self-hatred” (Davis 106). The topic of self-alienation amongst blacks is, in consequence, an essential aspect of how white racism has affected African American identity and self-perception; indicatively illustrating the psychological complexes that occur when the “oppressed is invaded psychologically by the oppressor” (Davis 106). The notion of self-alienation or “double-consciousness” was, of course, famously first allegorised by Du Bois as a “veil,” by means of which the black man could “only [...] see himself through the revelation of the other world” and so was denied any “true self-consciousness” (45). Such ‘double-consciousness,’ that is, this sense of looking at one’s self through a ‘veil’ - of always seeing one’s black self through the blue eyes of white others - subsequently initiates an inter-subjective dependence on an external consciousness to create a “reality and a presence” for itself and “an awareness of its worth” (*TBE* 38). Thus, the first object of desire of the racially ‘othered’ male develops from a general law that comes to him from outside the self and through the discourse of other

people, as a sanctioned yearning to be recognised by the dominant world of the ‘Other’ – namely, the white man.

Indeed, receiving a recurrently “glazed separateness” from, and distorted view of, their own heritage as a result of being part of this society whose media promotes whiteness as ‘desirable,’ black men in America must confront the “distaste [...] lurking in the eyes of all white people” that socially constructs them as objects and, moreover, consistently trust that allure of the white world (*TBE* 36). This of course causes them to respectively reject the world of blacks, and to similarly confirm their own nothingness, “because for [the white population] there is nothing [...] desirable or necessary [...] to see” (*TBE* 36). Such rejection of identity, in turn, is demonstrative of blacks’ being “[successfully] inferiorised by accepting a white racist image of themselves” (Davis 107). Certainly, the extensive lack of positive mirrored images for blacks, followed by their paradoxical reception and replication of the negative images that cause racial alienation and exclusion as conformations of life, firmly sets up a displaced search for whiteness in an identification with the dominant culture. A large number of black men consequently do not wish to eradicate the white power structure as much as to attain the image and lifestyle of the dominant society. In truth, all they really want is to “flourish” within such a separate and unequal society, “not to change it” (Davis 126). It is important to recognise, however, that any black identity shaped by white expectations is not so much an identity as a “mere shadow without substance,” deprived of any autonomous authenticity as their lives become a mere “performance for whites who cannot accept them as fully realised human beings” (Davis 113). Significantly, such oppression has so altered the personality of many blacks that they simply present themselves as images of what they surmise would be pleasing to whites, when in reality, “[they] [do] not really care for [white customs],” they “merely [want] other [people] to cast favourable glances [their] way” (*TBE* 92). But even with this compliance to society, the black male is all the same habitually written off by virtue of his colour, as no more than one “psychologically fucked up, dangerous, and violent sexual maniac,” whose “insanity” is

informed by an ultimate “inability to fulfil his phallocentric masculine destiny” in what is, in reality, a “racist context” (hooks, 1992 89).

Continually facing structural impediments to realising or exerting the socially inculcated masculine needs and desires they internalise, the black male characters of Morrison’s fiction thus find themselves, at any rate, perpetually caught in an anomic vacuum, wherein they are “pathologically out of balance,” “ungrounded in nature,” and “isolated from,” or else routinely “rejected by white culture” (Mayberry 4). Texts like *The Bluest Eye* thereby work to articulate allegorically the silenced voices of such marginalised black characters as Cholly Breedlove, Soaphead Church and Henry Washington, who have difficulty establishing a satisfactory subjectivity because of their “damaging internalisation of assumptions of immutable inferiority originating in an outside gaze” (Morrison 1992, 210). Indeed, having continually fallen victim to the failings of white structures, the black community of 1940s Lorain, Ohio, in which the novel is set, exhibit appetites that are, in effect, misshapen by its adaptation of white sexual mores, deterministically resulting in a sexual disorientation most disturbingly manifest in Cholly’s incestuous rape of his adolescent daughter. By presenting black consciousness in this way, however, as “synthesized in [the] eyes” of the white Other (*TBE* 109), the text’s portrayal of double-consciousness - which Michael Awkward reads as a “constant,” if not “permanently debilitating state” for Morrison’s black characters - succeeds to not only emphasise the detrimental effects of a negative self-concept on African American male autonomy, but shifts the reader’s ‘gaze’ away from the black male figure to focus on those white power structures that cause such black figures to abuse each other for predominance (Awkward 58).

As a result, Morrison effectively uncovers what may “never [have] occurred to [...] us,” that the “blame” for much of their self-destructive “lust and despair” lies not with African American men themselves, but with the “unyielding earth” of American culture, and its resistance to “sprout [...] the seeds” of black American male virility – that is, its extreme lack of supportive structures which would allow such male characters as Cholly Breedlove to cooperate constructively in the cultural making of meaning (*TBE* 4). Andrew Read concurs

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that Morrison's fiction knowingly represents black masculinity as a "discursive construct," one which has been recurrently "shaped and reshaped by the influence of hegemonic masculine ideologies of manhood, the cultural heritage of African American history, and the traumatic physical consequences of race oppression" (Read 528). The remainder of this chapter will hence be examining Morrison's 'womanist' insight into the relationships between African American men and women in *The Bluest Eye*, so as to highlight the ways in which the novel considers the "pervasive problems inherent in western social ideals of masculinity" and, particularly, the black male's ominously violent experience defining his masculine self within the displacing dictates of postwar America society (Read 528). This reading will deduce Morrison's work as a principal mediation on the many variations in masculinity, subsequently refuting the idea that a singular monolithic American manhood has ever existed. The efficacy of black masculinities brought forth by Morrison's essentially "human consideration" of an "old dog, a snake, a ratty nigger" (*TBE* 12) like Cholly may then prove as the means to the therapeutic recovery of black manhood in contemporary America, as well as to that of constructing new goals for all men in American culture, as she frequently forces the reader to overtly acknowledge that "comfortable evil" which "prevents [us] knowing what [we] [cannot] bear to know" (*TBE* 142), and to handle that deservedly difficult question of "*why*" Morrison's male characters react as they do by "[taking] refuge in *how*," exactly, they came to be as they are (*TBE* 4).

The novel opens with the time-honoured lines, "Here is the house. It is green and white. [...] It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick, and Jane live in the green-and-white house. They are very happy" (*TBE* 1). From the 1930s, right through to the 1970s, children across the US would have heard these words and seen these pictures, perhaps, Barbara Christian suggests, "more than any other single word-picture image" (1985 139). For Debra Werrlein, the pervasiveness of this national pedagogical image, wherein "safe American childhoods [...] thrive in families [that] defy depression-era hardships with economic and social stability," is indicative of a "*national* masterplot" that defines 'Americanness' within the strictures of "innocent white middle-class childhood" (56).

Indeed, as the “cornerstone of postwar prosperity and security” (Werrlein 57), “strong” and “smiling” nuclear families like Dick and Jane’s effectively signalled the triumph of American democracy and capitalism (*TBE* 1). The Elson-Gray curriculum surrounding Dick-and-Jane certainly reflects these “patriotic sentiments,” dispensing an expected, generic familial discourse that places responsibility for the nation’s future prosperity and security “squarely on the shoulders of white middle-class children” (Werrlein 57). By prefacing the novel with this standardised script of the canonical elementary Dick-and-Jane primer, Morrison thus carefully ‘primes’ the reader with such a simple “bourgeois myth of ideal family life” through which to frame and envisage the outer civilisation of her text (Awkward 61); yet similarly prompts us, through her very appropriation of these ‘white’ household lines, to mediate on what their inner significance here, within a ‘black’ text, may be. She then directly problematizes the simplicity of their image by stylistically “[playing]” the prose back at us again” (Christian, 1985 139) having, first of all, removed the capitalisation and punctuation from the fragments - “see jane she has a red dress she wants to play...” – and, finally, by eradicating any formal spacing – “whowillplaywithjane” – to the point that the uncooperative groups of succeeding letters render the visionary white text of the primer incoherent and, in turn, meaningless (*TBE* 1, 2).

It is important to clarify, however, that it is not Morrison’s writing in itself which divests the white word-picture image of its meaning. Instead, she seeks to deconstruct the mythical white text through the use of this parodic linguistic distortion in order to heighten the “lack of internal integrity essential to [Dick-and-Jane’s] simplistic order” (Christian, 1985 139). By literally removing the gaps from her recitation of the original text, Morrison in truth sets the “tonal modalities for the structure of [her] story,” figuratively exposing the detrimental disparities between these “standardised bland concepts projected as desirable,” and the white hegemony they impose on African-American minority families such as the MacTeers - whose nine-year old daughter, Claudia, narrates the tale - and the Breedloves - whose family plight is at the centre of the narrative (Christian, 1985 142). From the outset, Timothy Powell ascertains *The Bluest Eye* to be, as such, “a direct confrontation with the

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[...] institutionalised ethnocentrism of the white logos,” through which the author takes a necessary “first step” towards “clearing the way for the (w)holy black text to appear” by making clear “the inadequacies of the white mythology for representing the black self” (Powell 750).

Accordingly, Morrison proceeds to further manipulate this ‘confrontational’ technique by correspondingly framing the subsections of the novel with lines taken from this extract of the white primer, and ironically contrasting them with the black aesthetic experiences and voices of the fictional characters in an effort to echo such racial and class divisions in wider US culture. For example, whereas the “green-and-white” house of the primer is “very pretty,” the respective description of the MacTeer home as “old, cold,” but significantly still “green,” evokes a direct comparison between white “happy” middle-class standards and the “irritating and melancholy” working-class realities of Afro-American life (*TBE* 5, 24). What is more, unlike the carefree “Father [...] smiling [a] big [...] smile” in the primer, Daddy MacTeer’s face is juxtaposed as “a [cheerless] study,” his “tightened” mouth described as that of “Wolf killer turned hawk fighter,” who “worked night and day to keep one from the door and the other from under the windowsills” (*TBE* 1, 47). Labouring under “economic constraints” that render him “cruel to be kind” (Mayberry 17), the black working-class male such as he is consequently prohibited from “[laughing]” or “[playing] [the] good game” Dick and Jane’s white father captains, and hence Daddy MacTeer will not, or cannot, “unrazor his lips” (*TBE* 1, 47). The fact that the codified and institutional language of the white primer remains somewhat recognisable even though it has been distorted in a stark, unyielding black setting - just as it has been disfigured to the point of almost, but not quite complete, illegibility in Morrison’s revisions of its form – suggests, then, that while the idealisation of family life and childhood in the primer is desperately hopeless in the context of historical facts and effects of conquest, slavery, and exclusion, its deceptively abstract, middle-class ideologies are nevertheless still evident, if not deeply “woven into the very texture of the fabric of American life” (Powell 749).

The supervening effect of chaotic speed and disjointed sound which preludes the novel is, therefore, cleverly one of symbolic inversion as opposed to overt reduction, which more effectively underscores the destructive distance between the cold, clear, or else artificially flat and unrealistic, logic of abstract citizenship represented in the Dick-and-Jane text and, what Powell describes as, “the often irrational pain of the black text which is to follow” (749). Much of the novel’s powerful irony stems from this “call-and-response structure,” as the “simplicities the white-family primer” are in effect answered by the “complexities of black-family life” (Mayberry 16). Justine Baillie contends that this instructive ‘call’ of white, middle-class America and the textual ‘response’ of the black community accordingly permits the author to present the “alien ideological [...] language of the primer” in contrast with “her own voice” (57), so she may succeed to “interrogate [the] dominant white value system” without resorting to “direct authorial intervention” (48). Morrison is able to then artfully highlight the already underlying contradictions of this seemingly innocent, purposefully ignorant hierarchal social structure, which is what truly deprives the Dick-and-Jane reader of any sincere cultural coherence or ethical effectuality in the first place.

Significantly, Morrison’s structural use of the primer also signifies on strategies adopted by writers of slave narratives such as Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, “of authenticating their work by including a formal testimony of preface by a respected white personage” (Baillie 48). As Evelyn Schreiber points out, however, although these writings certainly formed “initial attempts to articulate black experience,” their romanticising of personal narratives for acceptance by white culture indicated that “the impact of white perspective [was] [still] evident,” and hence their ability to truly “confront the horrific core of slave experience” always ultimately remains “[quiet] as its kept” (Schreiber, 2010 5; *TBE* 4). In shaping a black silence so as to subsequently break it, Morrison thus transfigures the complexity and wealth of black American culture into a language worthy of the culture. Moreover, through drawing attention to the essential vacuousness of the out-dated mode of the white text, *The Bluest Eye* stands as a progressive testament to how “the African

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American writer, by 1970, can articulate a confident aesthetic that is not dependent on white authentication” (Baillie 48).

In many ways, Morrison’s text succeeds to then subvert familiar genres of African American writing by directly addressing slavery’s traumatic essence. Keith Byerman argues that Morrison’s fiction, in actual fact, reconstructs a past that is “beyond rationalist discourse(s) of historiography and social analysis,” revealing the “psychological and social effects of suffering” (3). The historical discrepancy between the late-sixties and seventies political climate in which Morrison publishes *The Bluest Eye*, and the retrospective setting in which the plot of the story unfolds, is, however, still of specific relevance here. Indeed, Claudia importantly tells us in her introduction that this narrative takes place just prior to the “fall of 1941,” the year wherein the “marigolds [...] did not grow,” but at which point the popularity of the Dick-and-Jane reader grew immensely (*TBE* 4). Morrison’s decision to write her first novel towards the end of the Civil Rights era and at the height of the Black Power movement in America, yet to take the narrative back to the cusp of a ‘mythical’ post-war, pre-civil rights period, no doubt suggests a distinct, if not deliberate awareness on the part of the author, of her nation’s evolving anxieties around questions of race, class, and gender equality, and the concurrent emergence of what Henry Giroux termed “organised forgetting” (2013 77).

This “neo-conservative phenomenon” (Giroux, 2013 77), whereby Americans began to “[hark] back to simpler times for gratification” (*TBE* 98) and assemble nostalgic delusions of an innocent postwar suburban bliss, markedly accorded the Dick-and-Jane primer a “new appeal” in the early 1970s, subsequently signifying the extent to which contemporary America did indeed yearn for “the fantasy of a mythically homogenous pre-civil rights era” (Werrlein 59). This “fantasy” of an essentially “blackless America,” was, of course, as Ralph Ellison explains, a “primitive reflex” by which contemporary American society attempted to “rationalise” and “make respectable” a fundamentally racist “national pathology” (1-2). Thus, in a remarkably contrary narrative of postwar American culture and childhood without “innocence [or] faith” (*TBE* 4), Morrison critically regresses to the same mythical postwar

American epoch of suburban security and affluence, but does so from the realist perspective of the “forgotten domestic tensions that simmered throughout the 1940s and boiled over into the 1950s” (Werrlein 56) so as to bear witness to the traditionally absent plight of the black American population for whom “there [were] no hiding places” during this period, “not in suburbia or in the penthouse” (Ellison 5). Her focus on family, education, and popular culture within the postwar African-American community, sure enough, provocatively evokes the propagating childhood innocence of the Dick-and-Jane primer as a sanitised “soil that is bad for certain kinds of flowers” (*TBE* 163); that is, as a pervasive “ideology of *national* innocence” on racial matters, one which simultaneously perpetuates and mystifies the harsher realities of nationalist hegemony, but through which we all ultimately “acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live” (Werrlein 54; *TBE* 163).

Just as the Dick-and-Jane stories equate white privilege with a “historyless version of Americanness” (Werrlein 59), the poverty and suffering of Morrison’s Breedlove family then necessarily represents a “trauma [story] [...] of both tremendous loss and survival,” a story that “[replicates] black abjection” (Byerman 3, 5) so as to demonstrate the way in which this insistent narrative of American innocence, or else convenient racialised ignorance, actually serves to occlude the “terrible story” of racial oppression that the nation “would rather not know anything about” (Morrison 208). Through an innovative literary form that both “fragments and compresses her primer-imitation,” and which in turn presents a sharply different version of 1940s family and childhood consisting of a subordinated Africanist narrative which would not otherwise fit into the simplified space of Dick and Jane primer, Morrison thus promptly calls attention to the legacy of unresolved racial trauma buried beneath that particular “historical gloss” by which Elson and Gray continually sanitise and obscure the way “unjust histories can shape a family’s struggling present” (Werrlein 60). Her retrospective reference to this prevalent period of the primer, in other words, effectively encapsulates the ideological impact visualising white middle-class family life as the norm has left on the American cultural imagination, especially with regards to the formation of a contemporary African American subjectivity.

Of course, in historically associating white suburban families with “prosperity, morality, and patriotism,” the black, urban working-class family was instantaneously “dissociated from the national ideal” (Werrlein 125). Hence, while the white-based primer effectively served to prime, or make ready, its white middle-class frontrunners for their principal roles in society, Morrison, in keeping with the likes of Ellison, shows exactly how it has assisted to ‘paint’ black cultural identity as ‘un-American’ - that is to say, how it has used ‘colour’ as an “easy and reliable gauge for determining to what extent one was or was not American,” if not human or un-human (Ellison 5). It is, therefore, important to appreciate that although Morrison’s black characters - the “renting black” Breedloves in particular (*TBE* 12) - are blatantly “not allowed” to partake in the family ideal as depicted by the primer, it is shown to “fill [their] dreams” all the same (*TBE* 82). Desperately “intent on [a] blue void [they] [cannot] reach,” her black subjects have been largely conditioned by the “watchful gaze” of white hegemonic society to “[miss] - without knowing what [they] missed” (*TBE* 162, 87, 51). That is to say, with only the white value system of their oppressors as a model for what it means to be ‘happy,’ the black community believe they must constantly pursue this mythically nostalgic ideal of nuclear home and family despite their historical marginalisation from such American prototypes - and, as J. Brooks Bouson points out, to furthermore feel an “intense personal shame” as a result of their “grotesquely futile effort” to achieve it (Bouson 24; *TBE* 162). Schreiber notably characterises this ‘blue void,’ namely, that which is supposedly ‘lacking’ for Morrison’s characters, as originating “in the gaze of the Other,” which subsequently creates a desire for what will close this gap” (2001 79). For eleven-year-old Pecola Breedlove, around whose displaced desire for Jane, Shirley Temple, and Mary Jane’s “smiling [...] blue eyes” the story outwardly revolves, “[those] blue eyes looking at her out of world of clean comfort” represent the figurative gaps underscored in Morrison’s rendition of the primer (*TBE* 38). To be precise, they signify the sanctioned beauty “[that] she lacks,” and yet, at the same time, paradoxically embody those dominant looks of a racially oppressive society, which perceive and confirm the entire Breedlove

family's "permanent awareness of loss" by constructing whiteness as the norm, while viewing and destabilising African-American cultural identity as 'Other' (*TBE* 36).

Interestingly, Morrison has long acknowledged her intention to inscribe, literarily, "[those] females who were peripheral in other people's lives," and hence who "no one had written [about] yet" (*Conversations* 95, 161). Her aim was, as such, to write the "[book] she had [always] wanted to read" (Morrison, *Conversations* 161); that is to say, to rewrite the synthetic white Jane through the delicate and vulnerable sincerity of "a girl" like Pecola, "still waiting for that plateau of happiness" (*TBE* 92). The deceptively innocuous language of the opening primer works, therefore, to furthermore offer a "sophisticated critique of gender issues through the juxtaposition of its nouns against the ensuing black narrative" (Mayberry 16). Mayberry identifies the "most specific and most powerful nouns" in the opening passage to be the two proper names, 'Dick and Jane' (16). What is so interesting in terms of masculinity, then, is the fact that, while a Dick-and-Jane primer "ostensibly involves [both] Jane *and* Dick," Morrison's Dick "is never called on to play" (Mayberry 16). Mayberry argues that we might interpret this omission as Morrison's "deliberate inversion of the traditional male-centred structure found in books written by both black and white male writers" (17). She respectively acknowledges, however, that "given the complex inclusion of male characters in the rest of the novel," it is more likely that Morrison also wishes to call attention to the "dehumanisation, devaluation, and withdrawal of African American boys as the black community responds to white-imposed values" (Mayberry 17). While there is certainly credit to Mayberry's analysis here, her straightforward substitution of Dick for the black son, Sammy Breedlove, whose "presence is located most palpably in his absence" having "run away from home no less than twenty-seven times," fails to account for the participatory exclusion of Dick in all three versions of the primer, including the primary citation, in which Dick is, of course, white (Mayberry 16; *TBE* 32).

Given that we are asked to "see Jane" but not Dick suggests that his exclusion relates more closely to the notion of 'invisibility' as a necessary condition for the perpetuation of white and male dominance, both in representation and in the realm of the

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social (*TBE* 1). As Sally Robinson explains, “masculinity and whiteness retain their power as signifiers and as social practices because they are opaque to analysis” (1). Robinson draws largely from the work of Donna Haraway, who speaks of the privilege of inhabiting an invisible, or ‘unmarked,’ body that has been the patrimony of white western man; “an inheritance through the ages that has witnessed an ever more precise marking of the bodies of others” (Robinson 1). Haraway argues, “from the eighteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries, the great historical constructions of gender, race, and class were embedded in the organically marked bodies of woman [and] the colonised or enslaved” (210). Those inhabiting these ‘marked bodies’ were, in consequence, “symbolically other” to the “fictive rational self of universal, and so unmarked, species man, a coherent subject” (Haraway 210). To be ‘unmarked,’ to this end, means to be ‘invisible,’ yet not in the sense of “hidden from history,” but rather, as the “self-evident standard against which all differences are measured” - namely, “hidden *by* history” (Robinson 1). It appears to be quite deliberately Dick’s white ‘presence,’ then, as opposed to Sammy’s, that is ‘located most palpably in his absence,’ for it is by way of this invisibility that Morrison subtly alludes to the hidden but ubiquitous order of patriarchy, out of which the white male subject succeeds to normalise and naturalise himself beyond classification.

Indeed, Dick is purposely shown to evade Morrison’s surveillance and adaptation of the white text as a result of his omission, subsequently underscoring the fact that “one cannot question, let alone dismantle, what remains hidden from view” (Robinson 1). The extent to which Morrison intended *The Bluest Eye* to be a novel as much about black male experience as about female, in turn, becomes clear, as this concept of an impalpable “blue void” - which urges black girls like Claudia to “[dismember] [...] white baby dolls” so as to “find the source” to the “beauty, the desirability that [...] escaped [her],” but which insistently “all the world said was lovable” - is first of all signified by the elusive existence of the specifically male figure, Dick (*TBE* 162, 28, 14). It is, in this sense, worthwhile to retrospectively review Morrison’s use of the metaphoric male Dick further, with regards to what hooks refers to as being, quite literally, “a dick thing” (2004 67). According to hooks, “in fantasy, we re-create

what we have lost in real life,” and for many black males, ‘fantasy’ is not about “what has been lost,” but more readily about “what is seen as missing” (2004 72). That which is ‘missing’ - or rather, which is “unattainable” for many black men - is, of course, this “potent sense of manhood” personified in the white Dick’s absent presence, and which “they are told,” by way of Dick’s present absence, “is the one form of power they can,” or should as men, phallically “possess” (hooks, 2004 72). Immediately, Morrison is, therefore, coupling white superiority with masculine normativity, and in so doing she deftly foregrounds the racialised struggle to ‘be a man’ in a culture where masculinity is discerned by someone else’s indiscernible specifications; specifications that are, essentially, unviable for the black male body, which has been permanently marked by its “easily identifiable [...] blackness” (*TBE* 67).

Thus, in contrast to the abstract Dick, the marginalised black male body is brought forth in somewhat feminised terms, as a physically penetrable, hypervisible “naked” and “dirty” object for the disembodied white gaze (*TBE* 55). One of the first images we have of Cholly is, in fact, of him as a boy, when “two white men [...] shone a flashlight right on his behind” as he was “newly but earnestly engaged in eliciting sexual pleasure from a little country girl” (*TBE* 31). Cholly’s sexuality, exposed and violated beneath the penetrative “beam of the flashlight [that] did not move” (*TBE* 31), is at once detached from his own “[body] [which] [had] began to make sense to him,” and diminished to a “[simulative] make-believe” performance by and for white regulation – “get on wid it. An’ make it good nigger” (*TBE* 115, 116). For Vanessa Dickerson, the way in which the two men are shown to disrupt Cholly’s “very private act of affirming his manhood” is highly significant, for it effectively signifies a primary white suspension of black masculine assertion (111). Through literally spotlighting his “nakedness, vulnerability, and powerlessness” (Dickerson 111), their white omnipresence effectually deforms Cholly’s first “sweet taste” of individual manhood into a public sideshow “junk heap by the railroad” - and, ultimately, into the first of many depersonalised black male “humiliations, defeats, and emasculations” (*TBE* 116, 103, 32). The fact that “there was no place for Cholly’s [own] eyes to go” symbolically reinforces the

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unseen authority of their white male gaze, together with the external sanctions and cultural measures imposed upon black masculine desire and volition (*TBE* 116). Notably, the two men, “one with a spirit lamp, the other with a flashlight,” are never actually described, but for Cholly, “there was no mistake about their being white; he could smell it” (*TBE* 116). The notion of ‘whiteness’ pervades, as such, in the form of an unspecified, intangible presence, one that “wormed its way into [Cholly’s] guts” (*TBE* 28, 116).

Unable to “protect, to spare, to cover [himself] from the round moon glow of the flashlight,” this penetrative imagery thereby intimates the vulnerability and exposure of the black male body to white procurement (*TBE* 118). Such marked accessibility, in turn, essentially problematizes what Susan Bordo refers to as “the male virtues of [physical] control and self-mastery” (1999 171-2). Indeed, if one of the key tenets of the dominant model of masculinity is not only dominance over others but also, as Bordo explains, “self-control, determination, cool, emotional discipline, mastery, and so on” (1999 171), then Cholly personifies the inevitable “failure [and] impotence” of the ‘naked’ black male who, by tradition, is always at the mercy of his racist social environment - both physically and psychically (*TBE* 118). Cholly is, of course, quite literally a “naked fuck” precisely because he is “poor and black” in a culture controlled by traditional white patriarchs like Mr Fisher, whose house encapsulates hegemonic “beauty, order [and] cleanliness” (*TBE* 39, 28, 99). The Breedlove home, by comparison, is described as a “box of peeling gray,” and Cholly merely one of many “renting blacks” who has been deterministically denied, from the beginning, the opportunity to provide for either his self or his family with anything more than an “unstorybooklike improvised fatherhood” (*TBE* 24, 12; Dickerson 110).

Cholly’s failure to avoid the objectifying gaze of a dominant white society, in this sense, denotes the “far-reaching negation of an insurmountable social order” (Schreiber, 2001 92). Indeed, the imperilled image of Cholly on “his knees” as his “body remained paralysed,” symbolically highlights the social stasis enforced on him throughout the text on account of his ‘blackness’ (*TBE* 116). For “as long as [he] looked the way [he] did,” Cholly’s modest attempts to buy his family and himself some of life’s amenities are shown

to be persistently thwarted by whites (*TBE* 34); who, in principal control of money and materials, take advantage of the “pleading eyes and tightened testicles” visited upon black men in American society (*TBE* 26); who, like Cholly, suffer deprivation of the capitalist properties and practices by which contemporary American manhood is signified. Thus, when Cholly buys a new sofa that is delivered with a “split straight across the back,” it becomes, as the deliveryman tells Cholly, “Tough shit, buddy. Your tough shit” (*TBE* 26). The ‘white smell’ of the two men from Cholly’s youth subsequently resurfaces as a foetid “joylessness [that] stank, pervading everything” (*TBE* 26). This “fretful malaise that asserts itself throughout the house” (*TBE* 27) potently colludes with the “existing system in keeping black men in their place” (hooks, 2004 xiv), for it is the very “humiliating [...] stink” of the sullied and “no good” purchase which respectively “withheld” Cholly from repairing the damage; and so the split “became a gash, which became a gaping chasm, that exposed the cheap frame and cheaper upholstery” (*TBE* 26).

For Dickerson, the fact Cholly “couldn’t take any joy in owning [the sofa]” marks a “social impotence that is accentuated by the presentation of other fathers in the novel” (*TBE* 26; Dickerson 117). This is made clear through the vivid comparison of Cholly’s daughter, Pecola, and the middle-class “high yellow dream child,” Maureen Peal (*TBE* 47). In contrast to Maureen, who wore “fluffy sweaters the color of lemon drops tucked into skirts with [orderly] pleats” and “long brown hair braided into two lynch ropes” (*TBE* 47-48), Pecola, as the principal representative of Cholly’s fatherly accomplishments, subsists in a “dirty torn dress, the plaits sticking out on her head, hair matted where the plaits had come undone” (*TBE* 71). This explicit juxtaposition of the girls’ material effects implicitly underscores the white patriarchy that an “old black [...] naked daddy” like Cholly can never emulate, as he is unable to either “genetically, or financially [create] [...] a story-book Jane” (*TBE* 56; Dickerson 118). Symbolically ‘lynched’ by Maureen’s bourgeois braids, Cholly is, instead, shown to be “psychologically locked down” by, as well as simultaneously “locked out” of, this society that allows him comparatively no respect, no money, no voice on account of his race and, in turn, class (hooks xiv). Cholly consequently suffers a defeat that “negates his

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ability to act conventionally,” that is, “within a patriarchal circle of commerce” (Dickerson 120). Hence, rather than “guarding the flames” to secure his family’s warmth, Cholly regresses to “absorb the community’s runoff, manifest the inevitable aberrations,” and ultimately burns down his insular domestic space; and in so doing, finally follows to “put his family outdoors” –metaphysically, as well as physically (Mayberry 24; *TBE* 47, 12).

To this end, Morrison highlights her concern over a particularly “impalpable form of racist ideology,” which by virtue of its naturalised and “indefinable nature,” is paradoxically “more pervasive, psychologically damaging and difficult to contest” than extreme, overt forms of racism (Baillie 55). As Gurleen Grewal explains, the Breedloves emerge from a history of “a race-based class structure of American society that generates its own pathologies” (118). What is so intriguing about Cholly’s explicit exposure or ‘nakedness,’ is, then, the way in which it ironically alludes to, and thus “[makes] visible” (Grewal 118), those “concealed, veiled [and] eclipsed” idioms of white superiority and power, beneath which remains the coercive “frame” and unadulterated “upholstery” of the slave gathering process (*TBE* 29, 26). Orlando Patterson emphasises that in order to maintain the status quo of white patriarchal normativity - and, within that, the relevant patterns of discrimination to sustain black deprivation - America needed to find “some way to clothe its beastliness,” that is “some idiom” through which patriarchal racism could be made “immediately palatable to those who exercise it” (18). Patterson is referring to the “principal way in which power is [...] interpreted in socially and cognitively acceptable terms” (18). In *The Bluest Eye* this takes the form of a “cloak of ugliness” worn by the Breedloves, both male and female (*TBE* 28).

By prescription of “some mysterious all-knowing master,” each one of them is given this cloak to wear and told, “You are,” by social convention, “ugly people” (*TBE* 28). The fact that they “looked [...] about themselves and saw nothing to contradict the statement” - moreover, found “support for it leaning at them from every billboard, every movie, every glance” (*TBE* 28) - thereby underscores the distinction between “what is actually going,” and the “homemade [cultural] models [and] mental structures [...] developed to *explain* the

actual social processes” (Patterson 19). What is more, it accounts for the pernicious way in which the Breedloves’ distorted racial awareness respectively transpires, not externally, but internally. Indeed, the fact they “accepted [their] ugliness without question,” that is to say, “took [it] in their hands, threw it as a mantle over them” and “went about the world with it” (*TBE* 29), converts those publically projected negative images - which form the very foundation of black social alienation and exclusion through “reinforcing and reinscribing white supremacy” (hooks 1992, 1) - into an “articulation of character,” and thus, into an internalised confirmation of black life (*TBE* 29). Given that Cholly’s “ugliness” is considered more explicitly in terms of his pathological “behaviour,” as he “commenced to getting meaner and meaner [...] all of the time,” furthermore highlights how, exactly, the subtly punitive power of this racist, capitalist culture is able to remain carefully concealed behind the “despair, dissipation, and violence” it directly produces (*TBE* 28, 92). Certainly for Franz Fanon, it is by way of this “collective unconscious” being put into daily practice by the white man that the black man becomes the recipient of projected feelings which are unacceptable, and it is when such base attitudes become embedded within his own self, that he, the black man, becomes then “oppressed” with the “whole weight of his blackness” (192, 150). The African American male is coerced to feel he is black only to the degree that he is “the symbol of Evil and Ugliness” (Fanon 180), and hence, “after having been the slave of the white men,” the black man in contemporary capitalist America “enslaves himself,” and purportedly “makes himself inferior” when the truth is that he is being “made inferior” (Fanon 192, 129). The supposed ‘ugliness’ of the Breedlove family emerges, therefore, from “their conviction” (*TBE* 28); namely, their complete compliance to what “shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs” all agreed (*TBE* 28) – that working-class “niggers” who do not “[wear] white shirts and blue trousers,” must “[wear] their ugliness, put it on, so to speak, although it [does] not belong to them” (*TBE* 67, 28).

This socially inculcated subjugation, in effect, typifies that which Susan Willis has identified as the legitimised “erosion of black cultural identity” and “surrender to commodification that occurred under capitalism” (211). Economics becomes, as such, the

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primary medium through which Morrison's black characters "learned all there was to love and all there was to hate," with any black financial success in the novel being accordingly attributed to an effectual identification with white culture and respective erasure of the Afro-American community (*TBE* 95). Of course, 'right,' in a racist capitalist society, means 'white,' and capitalism offers a way to such whiteness through the "consumption of commodities and the style these evoke" (Willis 215). In pecuniary terms, this means an approximation of the "clean and quiet," Dick-and-Jane bourgeois class, and a distinct "separation from," if not sanitised segregation of, "dirty and loud" black cultural practice (*TBE* 66-7; Willis 265; *TBE* 67). Significantly, this desire to evade the "anonymous misery" of a racist reality and achieve "dreams of affluence and vengeance" in the dominant social order appears in the text's description of those black girls "who come from Mobile," and who "live in quiet black neighbourhoods where everybody is gainfully employed" (*TBE* 29, 63). These suburban women, in their desire to "feel secure" within white society, attempt to "separate [themselves] in body, mind, and spirit from all that suggested Africa" (*TBE* 65, 132); to erase all sense of otherness from their lives by "[straightening] their hair with Dixie Peach" and "[holding] their behind in for fear of a sway too free" (*TBE* 64); and to ultimately negate any uniqueness of black cultural identity by "[cultivating] the habits, tastes, [and] preferences" of the dominant culture (*TBE* 133).

Elaine Showalter aptly explains how the "first phase" any subculture or minority will experience is one of "prolonged [...] imitation of the prevailing modes of the dominant tradition," together with an "internalisation of its standards" and "its views on social roles" (11). In a postwar American context, this takes the form of a "misguided allegiance to the status quo" amongst "black folks," who, hooks argues, desperately try to "conform to patriarchal norms of marriage and family" (2004 86, 11) - that is, to the "stiffly starched and white" nuclear structure of the Dick-and-Jane primer (*TBE* 65). This subscription to a white, bourgeois social code, wherein individual 'happiness' is precariously based upon one's capitalistic acquisition of a barren "nest" decorated with "pretty paper flowers" and "porch swings [hanging] from chains" (*TBE* 65) - for "you'd think with a pretty house like that and

all the money they could hold onto, they would enjoy one another" (*TBE* 92-3) – offers a figurative example of the “hopelessly futile effort” on the part of Afro-Americans to exorcise what the “divided psyche” regards as the poverty, the ugliness, or else the essential “evil of blackness” (*Awkward* 76), and an irresponsibly displaced bid to “fill the vacant places” respectively left behind with those material “things” by which societal status is ostensibly obtained (*TBE* 91). Comparable to antecedent texts by African American female writers such as Nella Larsen’s *Passing* (1929), Morrison’s “sugar-brown Mobile girls” (*TBE* 65) determinedly exhibit this culturally conditioned compulsion to replicate restrained, middle-class mores - and within that, a necessity to expunge their inferiorised, ‘bestial’ blackness so as to “get things they wanted” (Larsen 17) - namely, an appropriately ‘passable’ domestic morality in which the “safety and permanence” of their social standing is “fixed” and “certain” (Larsen 87). Their “virtuous stability,” in this manner, “is built upon the repression of [their] embodied blackness” (Grewal 29); a repression which manifests in a reified deformation of black sexuality, with each of these intraracial women only giving the “unyielding limbs” of her body “sparingly and partially” to “certain men,” as she merely “[pretends] she is having an orgasm” so as to ensure “she will remain dry between her legs” (*TBE* 13, 65).

It is by virtue of this socially sanctioned, suppressive “self-division” that ‘blackness,’ as a natural and “valuable human condition,” is, then, aseptically “denied and destroyed,” and always, ultimately, to the detriment of the black community (*Awkward* 80, 76). Having internalised the prejudices of white culture, it is imperative to these women that “the black, the dark, the Negro vanish from consciousness” (Fanon 194), and so they furthermore “wash themselves with orange-colored Lifebuoy soap, dust themselves with Cashmere Bouquet talc, clean their teeth with salt on a piece of rag, soften their skin with Jergens Lotion,” and all in an effort to disguise, repress, and “wipe [the Funk] away” (*TBE* 64). For Christopher Douglas, ‘funk’ is embodied and racialised through various “phenotypic differences that mark the social construction of race,” and which “threaten to overwhelm the whitening process” (161). The desire to ‘wipe the funk away’ thereby points

to the “loss of culture with integration” (Douglas 161) - that is, to the “humiliating absence of dirt” (*TBE* 15) - and the need for “separatism and racial authenticity” (Douglas 161) so as to overcome this “irritable, unimaginative cleanliness” (*TBE* 15). Indeed, what becomes clear is the extent to which African Americans, although always “aware of their historical connection with each other,” have not always been free to “recognise it, make it explicit, define it, and build on it” (Billingsley 10). Instead, they have learnt “how to behave” according to these white Western tenets, which means “[getting] rid of the funkiness, the dreadful funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of the wide range of human emotions” (*TBE* 64).

It is not surprising, therefore, that by dint of this very racial reservation and artificial sanitisation - or else “commodification of experience” (Willis 227) - each woman soon becomes so clean - “too clean” - she no longer “[smells] like a woman” (*TBE* 9), having essentially “groomed away [her] identity” with what Patrice Cormier-Hamilton defines as “the hot comb of self-hatred” (117). Notably, Henry Washington leaves his wife, Della, who “always did keep a good house,” for the very reason he “couldn’t take no more of that violet water [she] used” (*TBE* 8). Henry’s instinctual rejection of Della’s synthetic deference - on the elemental basis that he “wanted a woman to smell like a woman” and “Della was just too clean for him” - is, however, publically construed as illustrative of his own masculine impotence as opposed to his wife’s inauthentic racial abstraction - “Ain’t that nasty! [...] What kind of reasoning is that?” (*TBE* 8). The community dismiss Henry, sure enough, as just an “old crazy nigger she married up with,” and who in the end “didn’t help her head none” (*TBE* 8). Persuaded chiefly by financial exigency, the female commune “[forget] lust and simple caring for,” and with a regard for ‘love’ as mere “possessive mating,” consequently deduce “some men,” specifically black men like Henry and Cholly, to be “just dogs,” entirely useless as patriarchal headmen on account of the fact they fail to conform to the commoditised strictures of mainstream white society, and so prevent their family from societally moving “head none” (*TBE* 95, 8).

Here Morrison is critically underlining an unnatural, capitalistic perversion of black values, and an “unwillingness,” or else powerlessness, “to take pride in one’s own culture in the black community” (Cormier-Hamilton 116). It is, of course, owing to this “black adaptation of white sexual mores” (Mayberry 21) and symptomatic rupture in the formation of a collective black psyche, that Henry, “with a longing that almost *split* him open” (*TBE* 125; emphasis added), is then deterministically reduced to partaking in the disorientating “sexual cravings” of a “picking” and “pinching” paedophile (*TBE* 131, 76-7); for “those humans whose bodies” may be considered “least offensive,” and which thereby personify those “manageable” myths of “cleanliness” broadcast by white society, belong to “little girls” who “smacked of innocence” (*TBE* 132). In this regard, it is important to emphasise how “entrée into the bourgeois class only partially explains the deformation of black [...] sexuality,” with sexual repression in novel being furthermore related to this idea of “race hatred in a class society” (Willis 228). It is, likewise, key to our particular reading of masculinity in the text to recognise the way in which Morrison roots the genesis of an embryonic black male ‘deformation’ such as Henry’s, first of all, in Geraldine - “one such [...] light-skinned [...] girl from Mobile, who did not sweat in her armpits nor between her thighs” - and the way in which her indiscriminate reverence of white standards, and respective black ‘race hatred,’ means she will not allow her son Junior to “play with niggers” (*TBE* 67).

For Douglas, even though this “pretty milk-brown lady in [a] pretty gold-and-green house” (*TBE* 72) cannot, literally, “change her race,” she can “try change her culture” (Douglas 144). This ‘civilising’ process is, however, significantly experienced as “a loss rather than a gain or transformation” (Douglas 144), as Geraldine’s motherly refusal to extend her son any regard beyond material “comfort and satiety” – a refusal to, in effect, ‘breed love’ - produces a pronounced aggression in Junior (*TBE* 67). Indeed, in an abortive attempt to “avoid any [...] subtle signs” that may threaten to “erode” the “not always clear [...] line between coloured and nigger,” Geraldine neurotically “brushed, bathed, oiled, and shod” Junior, but never did she “talk to him, coo him, or indulge him in kissing bouts” (*TBE* 148

67). This withdrawn acting out of white cultural demands, whereby Junior's hair must be carefully "etched," his skin kept from "becoming ashen," and his psyche indoctrinated with the notion that "niggers were dirty and loud" whereas "coloured people were neat and clean," subsequently signifies not only his mother's preoccupied lack of affective attachment, but her effective failure to try to pass on an adequate understanding of racial victimisation to her black son in what becomes, instead, a self-perpetuating cycle of bitterly ironic, racially 'bred hate' (*TBE* 67-8). Crucially, Junior still longs, "more than anything," to "play with the black boys" - to have them "push him down the mound of dirt" and to feel their masculine "hardness press on him" - and yet he continually is denied the opportunity to "smell their wild blackness" on account of his mother's socialised internalisation of the prejudices of the dominant white culture (*TBE* 68). It is by virtue of these sanitised constraints put on his black male experience by a racist ideology, then, that Junior comes to represent the male whose natural black self is 'enslaved' by unnatural, middle-class white values (*TBE* 68).

Indeed, "alternately bored and frightened at home," it is no doubt owing to his frustration with the "constant [...] watch" of white supervision - which will not let him "say 'Fuck you' with that lovely casualness" - that compels Junior to misdirect his middle-class masculine dissatisfaction "more and more" towards "bullying girls" (*TBE* 68); specifically, little working-class black girls like Pecola, who "nobody ever played with," and who Geraldine had faced, personally, "all of her life" (*TBE* 71). The purposefulness of Junior's anger is, of course, to "[lap] up the dredges of [his] shame" (*TBE* 37), and to supersede this "accentuated self-consciousness," or else "double-consciousness induced by racism as a form of internalised shame" (Read 533), as far as possible with anterior emotion of pride through violently inflicting the "guilt and impotence," which rose in him in "a bilious duet," onto the only target within his social grasp (*TBE* 127). For Junior, there is an absolute "sense of being in anger," a virile "reality and a presence" to counter the "too easily surfeited" and emasculated African American personage (*TBE* 38). Markedly, his displaced rage is characterised, explicitly, as a "learned" ability to otherwise "direct his hatred of his mother,"

thereby suggesting that it is, in truth, Junior's "minimization of his attachment needs" which plays out in this deposed victimisation (Schreiber, 2001 71). The fact that "it made him feel good" to make the girls "scream and run" certainly highlights his masculine need to "hang on to [some] feeling of power," that is, to sadistically compensate for his white-created inferior, or 'junior,' black position in a white American society (*TBE* 68, 138). Yet his essential hostility toward white racism intrinsically still mirrors that of white culture, as he simply "perpetuates the cycle of racial separation and abuse that he absorbs from his mother" (Schreiber, 2001 71).

In this sense, Morrison furthermore conveys how the vacant values of an imposing white culture can be enforced through a variety of disaffecting means, and, as Laura Vickroy explains, how the underlying "traumatic experience of social powerlessness and devalued racial identity prevents the African American community from joining together and truthfully evaluating the similarity of their circumstances, much less finding ways to oppose dominant forces" (Vickroy 92-93). Fanon similarly describes how, "little by little," this "formation and crystallisation of an attitude and a way of thinking and seeing that [is] essentially white," furtively encourages an individual separation from one's cultural centre in the form of an abject 'shaming' of the disadvantaged 'naked' black body within the African American community (148); a "shame" which is, in truth, "brought on by the [very] absence of shame," thus highlighting the extent to which black cultural identity has been "shaped and trained" to the prescribed white value system in spite of itself (*TBE* 55; Fanon 149). This unconscious feeling of guilt, arising from an "elaborately designed," subliminal sense of black "hopelessness" in terms of the ideals set forth by the defining white reference group (*TBE* 50), is especially evident in the way Pecola is also taunted by a number of black schoolboys, who attempt to 'identify' with the "civilising power" by making "the nigger the scapegoat of [their] moral life" (Fanon 194). As a result, they displace "their exquisitely learned self-hatred [...] for their own blackness" onto that of a "nasty little black bitch" like Pecola (*TBE* 50, 72), antagonistically chanting: "Black e mo. Black e mo. Ya daddy sleeps nekked" (*TBE* 50).

In ostracising Pecola for “matters over which the victim had no control” - that being, “the colour of her skin and speculations on the sleeping habits of an adult,” specifically, her black father – Bay Boy, Woodrow Cain, Buddy Wilson and Junie Bug partake in an assaultive self-stereotyping process of white-based socialisation, wherein “their contempt for their own blackness” is transfigured into a “smoothly cultivated ignorance” and deliberate disregard for their allegedly “irrelevant” similarity to their victim (*TBE* 50-1). As with Junior and those women who come from Mobile, the boys’ cultural withdrawal is predicated on this ritual of making racial culpability conscious through marking it with visibly “clear [...] and telltale signs,” and by liberating the unconscious from any associative blame through an outward projection onto “black and ugly black e mos” like Pecola (*TBE* 68, 56). In this way, their guilt and hatred of blacks’ inferiorised position in racist society - or “shadow” as Erich Neumann terms it - which cannot be accepted as a negative part of their own psyche, is externalised, and can therefore be perceived, punished, and purged as “the alien out there” instead of being dealt with as “one’s own inner problem” (Neumann 50). Significantly, Morrison has described how the white imagination creates such an ‘alien’ “fabrication of [the] Africanist persona,” and she states that “in [this] construction of blackness and enslavement could be found not only the not-free but also, with the dramatic polarity created by skin colour, the projection of the not-me” (1992 17, 38). Of course, by “projecting” this “evil shadow” onto stigmatised groups, as Neumann explains, the dominant majority is not only assured of its own power over a minority labelled as ‘different’ and thus ‘inferior,’ but is able to furthermore “rid itself ceremonially” of the real evil that exists “within the [racist] community at large” by the use of a “visibly imperfect, shadow-consumed scapegoat” (Neumann 51). That is to say, in circumstances where ‘evil’ - which, for our purposes here, can be defined as “a pronounced failure to achieve the ideal values and standards that have been set up by the tribe as exclusively desirable” – must be eradicated from the community, that evil is consistently conceptualised, “both in the Euro-American psyche and in the divided Afro-American sensibility,” as the “specifically and culturally black” (Awkward 76).

For blacks and whites alike, the “air of the nation” is thus “perfused with the idea of white supremacy,” and because “everyone grows to manhood under this influence,” Morrison’s boys effectively exhibit how black American men have been “taught to hate [blacks],” and, by extension, to inherently “hate themselves” (Grier & Cobbs 153). Awkward congruently contends that, “in a country that has traditionally viewed [him] as the shadowed personification of evil,” for the Afro-American to then “split” himself into “shadow (evil, black) and un-shadowed (ideal, American) selves,” is to openly invite the kind of “Afro-American self-contempt” as evident here, in *The Bluest Eye* (Awkward 76). Notably, however, it “for some reason” never once occurs to these boys to direct their “hatred toward the [white men]” - that is, to the direct source of their pain - with any anger toward the systematised cruelty of white culture manifesting, instead, in this continual racial self-division/denigration (*TBE* 31, 118). It is, therefore, important to stress the extent to which this unspecified ‘reason’ has its genesis in the dominant society, and how it is, in fact, very much the complicated and convoluted upshot of the “small, black, helpless” African American male’s internalisation of, and inferiorisation by, white racism (*TBE* 119). Indeed, just like Cholly “in impotence” before the “big, white, armed” hunters, each of these “shamefaced” boys subconsciously knows “what his conscious mind did not guess” (*TBE* 118, 113, 118) – that hating whites for putting him there, “on the hem of life,” would have “consumed him, burned him up like a piece of soft coal, leaving only flakes of ash and a question mark of smoke” (*TBE* 11, 118).

In view of the accustomed social reality in which “*whites* have superior power and generally are in control of political and law enforcement agencies of the community,” Kenneth Clark clarifies how “Negroes are rarely able to express their hostility and aggressive impulses directly against them” (56). In his relations with “them” - them being *whites* - the African American is, instead, required to “adopt substitute or indirect forms of aggression” (Clark 56). It is for what they perceive to be “their own sake” that this low class of “nigger” boys, in the same re-directive manner as Junior, then turn whatever “semiprecious” power they may have (*TBE* 50), “not against those in authority,” but, as

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Peter Stallybrass and Allon Whyte explain, “against those who are even lower” (53). In other words, they servilely accept the prevailing racial myths and customs in an extension of extrinsic will, and, from a thereby “psychologically ‘white’ position,” violently cultivate their anger of weaker social groups, most commonly “members of [their] own, already oppressed group” (Clark 56). Because the black American man is, in this way, prone to offset his subordinate position by displacing his hostility onto “another black person whom he deems less powerful,” much black male violence is “directed toward black females” (hooks, 2004 56). So, rather than countering the controlling and subjugating force of white supremacy, “the boys announced their manhood” (*TBE* 72) through engaging in a process of “displaced abjection” by which they “violently abuse and demonise” an individual who could potentially be an ally (Stallybrass & Whyte 19). For each of these boys, it is no doubt “important to do something to reinstate himself” (*TBE* 113), namely, to reaffirm their masculine self-difference by purging the “fiery cone of scorn” that had “burned for ages in the hollows of their minds,” and paradoxically passing on their pain in an “unbroken cycle of racial pathology” (*TBE* 50; Davis 118). Hence, “heady with the smell of their own musk” and “thrilled by the easy power of majority” (*TBE* 50), Pecola repeatedly becomes “a scapegoat for suppressed black male frustration and rage” (Mayberry 2), and the necessary feminine ritual object of “sacrifice” in a masculine “macabre ballet” designed to censure the boys’ own emasculated racial identities; which are in point of fact ironically reflected in the “wildly fitting [...] incoherence” of their projected abuse (*TBE* 50).

On this level, Morrison’s boys, too, seek to “wipe away” that shameful ‘mark’ of guilt externally embodied by an “ignored” and “despised” black girl like Pecola, but which is, of course, internally attributed to the fact that “they themselves were black,” and the essential model for manhood in America is white (*TBE* 34, 50). In Pecola’s overt persecution at the hands of this circle of young black males, we are, in actual fact, figuratively exposed to the way in which this idea of ‘evil,’ though not accepted by the black American male as being his own, is nevertheless regarded as an evil belonging to the “collective structure of [his] own tribe” - and which must, therefore, be “eliminated in a collective manner”

(Neumann 51). Tragically, this collective conduct, “at this point in [the] nation’s history,” is cloaked in “sexist mores,” which, hooks maintains, “encouraged [...] black men to place accountability onto black females for their woes” (2004 14, 12). Indeed, although “blacks folks believed that slavery and racism sought the emasculation of Afro-American men,” in keeping with a culture of dominance like the US - ultimately founded on the principle that “violence is necessary for the maintenance of the status quo” (hooks, 2004 49) - this discourse of emasculation subtly shifted away from white supremacy and culpability for black male oppression in postwar America, toward that of violently blaming “the one who bore witness to his failure, his impotence” (*TBE* 118). To be precise, “when white men beat [black] men,” the black woman “cleaned up the blood,” and, in this process of displaced abjection, moreover “went home to receive abuse from the victim” (*TBE* 108).

Like Hurston before her, Morrison thus evaluates the position of the black woman in America as having been, since her very beginning, “de mule of the world” (Hurston 19). Of course, “everybody in the world was in a position to give [her] orders” (*TBE* 108), and this is very much owing to the fact that, when “de white man is de ruler of everything,” he will forever “throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up” (Hurston 19). The “nigger man will pick it up,” obligingly, “because he have to” (Hurston 19), but “not content to throb in isolation,” he will “diffuse [his] own pain” and use it “as a weapon to cause others pain” (*TBE* 27-8). With working-class black men like Cholly continually “edging into life” this way - i.e. “from the back door” (*TBE* 108) - the extent to which the emasculating residue of slavery impinges on the modern black male psyche becomes, then, clear, and it is this “lullaby of grief,” which “enveloped him, rocked him” (*TBE* 109), that is responsible for the sexist suppression of “womenfolks,” upon whom the black man feels he must respectively “hand de load” (Hurston 19), if not violently “[dump] all of [his] waste” (*TBE* 162). Certainly for hooks, aggression prevails as “the simplest way to assert patriarchal manhood” (2004 50), and it is by means of this traditional “budding male instinct” that the black men in Morrison’s fiction internalise the attitudes of their oppressor and, in turn, use sexism in the belief that he may “no longer have to feel themselves outside the cultural

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norms” (*TBE* 51; hooks, 2004 50). Moreover, given the white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal system in which they live, most of these black male characters are, as a rule, routinely prevented from having access to “socially acceptable positions of power and dominance” (hooks, 2004, 57), and hence they must claim their manhood - in accordance with “mainstream white culture that both requires and rewards black men for acting like brutal psychopaths” - through socially, and sexually, unacceptable channels; the most deplorable example being Cholly’s rape of his daughter (hooks, 2004 47).

It is certainly possible to analyse Cholly’s incestuous act in ways that are similar to the above discussion of Geraldine, Junior, and the black schoolboys - namely, as his attempt to displace and diminish the “persistent pain of the ignominy of his own sexual initiation” by involving his daughter in an “even more ignominious sexual act” (*Awkward* 80-1). Such an analysis would, however, suggest a certain degree of active or reactive black male malevolence and volition, thereby undermining the crippling extent to which the internecine forces governing Cholly’s aberrant behaviour with his daughter are entrapped in apportionately aberrant histories of racial violence and slavery that exceed his consciousness and agency. Indeed, as a “burned-out black man” with no “useful [...] knowledge of the world and of life,” Cholly is, in reality, psychologically detained by the economic and sexual circumstances of his youth (*TBE* 127); which, like an “invisible collar,” seemed “to strangle him, hold him back” (*TBE* 64, 124). As if “yanked” by an “unseen hand jerking an unseen string” (*TBE* 40), Cholly is, moreover, deterministically driven to physically replicate the trauma of these violating circumstances “that threatened to smother him,” regardless of “what he saw or what he felt” (*TBE* 64, 127) - although his “befuddled brain” usually “could not tell” anyway (*TBE* 127).

The fact that Cholly is described quite distinctly here, as being not just mentally, but also physically isolated from any comprehension of himself - only becoming aware, respectively, “that he was uncomfortable,” as he felt the “discomfort” uncontrollably “dissolve into pleasure” before “[threatening] to become vomit” - notably conceives his struggle to be self-determining in what are expressly bodily terms (*TBE* 127). Cathy Caruth

has described how, “in addition to the psychological contributions of trauma, bodily components store and perpetuate traumatic events and sensations” in a fatefully melancholic feedback loop (61). For Caruth, what causes trauma, then, “is a shock that appears to work very much like a bodily threat,” and what is “passed on,” is “not just the meaning of the words,” but “their performance” (Caruth 111). It is by way of her very deliberate attention to corporeal detail, of course, that Morrison then wittingly warrants a parallel reading of Cholly’s rape of his daughter with that of his own rhetorical childhood ‘rape’ by the two white men, wherein he felt forcibly devoid of determination, “as though [he] had no part in the drama taking place around [him]” (*TBE* 116). The most masculine act of physical aggression is symbolically transformed, as such, into a passive re-enactment of a black male submission, whereby Cholly’s repressed body, “before he could realise what he knew,” emerges as the predestined depository of white patriarchal violence (*TBE* 123).

Laura Doyle elaborates on the relevance of these two connected incidents, noting, first of all, how Cholly is “undone by a racialised gaze, precisely in his moment of entry into the world of embraces, of sexuality,” which ultimately results in the “racialised seizure of the intimate encounter” (1994 202-3). For Doyle, Morrison purposely “tracks the chain reactions that follow from this seizure, the force of its digressionary currents branding through bodies over time and into the future,” so as to reveal “the dangerous mingling of race, sex, and hatred as they move within these historical currents,” especially as they “shape Cholly’s relations with the women in his family” (Doyle, 1994 203). Morrison no doubt carefully considers this sense of “seizure” in both of Cholly’s sexual dealings, and this is made artfully clear in the way she draws attention to the recurrent lack of male orgasm. It is, indeed, significant that the two men decide to leave Cholly despite acknowledging, “the coon ain’t comed yet” (*TBE* 117), and that Cholly, himself, analogously affects to “cut it short” when he initially rapes Pecola (*TBE* 128). Of course, both cases are primarily about sexual power rather than pleasure, but the fact that Morrison invests in this juxtaposition so specifically – preferring not to describe Cholly’s final insemination of Pecola, and choosing to unfold, instead, his first ‘unfulfilled’ rape of her in the same arrested and compliant detail as his

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former rape within a rape, irrespective of a tangible white presence - reiterates the degree to which Cholly's violent actions are at the ancillary mercy of some larger colonising force, which literally 'seizes' his male substance, as opposed to stemming from his own inherent or autonomous masculine desire for power, or, indeed, pleasure. That is, Morrison wanted "the body," through its lack of primary physical conviction or fulfilment, to "speak" the unspeakable experience of trauma - not just from this "one specific traumatic event" in Cholly's life, "but also from [the] physical environment and support systems" unfavourable to African Americans (Caruth 61; Schreiber, 2010 9).

To this end, any masculine certitude Cholly may appear to have is predicated upon his colonised subject status and internalisation of the racist values that pervade American culture; with "the impulses of reaching, touching, and holding each other that arise within the open of our-bodies-in-the-world" merging here with the "pressured need to invade, collapse, and violate" (Doyle, 1994 205). It therefore becomes particularly problematic to read the black American male in the same manner as critics such as Jerry Bryant, according to whom Cholly is "a free man" (181). For Bryant, although Cholly is "not free in a legal sense," he is "free in his head," and this freedom is the result of his rejection of the "expectations of both the black and white community," and essential "refusal to be an extension of another's will" (180). While it may be true that Cholly does not conventionally correspond to the capitalistic expectations of white culture, he most certainly concurs to the essentialist racist discourse that anticipates the lower-class black male as the "bad nigger" (Bryant 2). Given that he "somehow [...] could not astound," but could "only be astounded" (*TBE* 32), emphatically stresses this sense of Cholly's 'being-for-others,' as he is only "dangerously free" to the extent that he inadvertently becomes the "ruthless, brutal, [...] dehumanised beast" the white master class deems he, as a black man, is supposed to be (*TBE* 125; hooks, 2004 49). Indeed, "projecting his own desires onto the Negro," which ultimately have no relation to lived experience, the white man behaves "as if the Negro really had them" (Fanon 165). The African American 'Negro,' unable to "remember what his own self looked like" in a racist society, "only [knowing] that he was [...] black" (*TBE* 121),

faithfully reproduces that white “*imago*” of the Afro-American, and behaves, too, as if he did indeed intrinsically possess those imposed qualities (Fanon 169). Thus, when faced with the intrusive gaze of the Other - which “violently evacuates the subject, leaving only an empty space where before there was arguably a self” (Schreiber, 2001 75) - Cholly anxiously “looked back at the eye” (*TBE* 109), and, “having grown accustomed to the poison, responded one day to the severe pressure” by “[doing] its bidding” (*TBE* 92, 109).

Interestingly, the reader is briefly informed of a “second time,” when Cholly “tried to do it” to Pecola while she was “sleeping on the couch” (*TBE* 157-8). This is, of course, the “no good” couch described earlier, which not only “withheld the refreshment in a sleep slept on it,” but actually “imposed a furtiveness on the loving done on it” (*TBE* 27). This abstract ‘furtiveness,’ markedly manifest in the form of this black father’s incestuous ‘loving’ of his daughter, powerfully imparts Cholly’s depraved violence as a “violence born of total helplessness,” by means of effectively constituting his actions in terms of the economic and spiritual impoverishment he suffers at the hands of the white nation’s “confidence born of a conviction of superiority” (*TBE* 116, 133). The ironic use of essentialist language such as “born,” underscores the extent to which white American cultural values and hierarchies have been socialised, internalised, and normatively embedded in the African American psyche. Such ‘helplessness’ and ‘superiority,’ in other words, are but the mere products of a violently confident, racist culture, which seeks to corrupt the black psyche by inculcating the African American’s debased object position as normative and natural. Akin to the sexually fatal conduct of Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940), Bigger Thomas, Morrison consequently constructs the foremost rape scene as a physical manifestation of the social, psychological, and personal desperation and frustration of an emotionally disfigured, black male ‘victim,’ who has been “stretched to the snapping point by a thousand white hands” (Wright 263), and who, “in the end, [...] acts to put an end to his tension” by “[responding] to the world’s anticipation” of “the Negro [as] bad, the Negro [as] mean, the Negro [as] ugly” (Fanon 113). Like Bigger, Cholly’s rape becomes, in truth, the principal representation of a “profound emotional state,” which, Marilyn Maxwell argues, “taps into a man’s ontological awareness

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of a sudden absence of choices when he is confronted by the predatory assaults of a racist majority” (203); a majority that is “after you so hot and hard,” they “don’t let you feel what you want to feel, [...] you can only feel what they doing to you,” which is “[choking] you off the face of the earth” (Wright 382).

In contrast to Wright, however, Morrison does not couple the rape with murder, nor does she “invoke the rhetoric of un-tempered male rage” (Maxwell 205). Morrison, in fact, consciously seeks to ‘soften’ the scene by “subverting the language into a *feminine*,” or else “*passive* mode,” by which Cholly’s violation of his daughter can be read as a “loving assault” (Morrison, *Conversations* 126). That is, as the distorted “tenderness [or] protectiveness” of a father who, had he not been “alone in the world since he was thirteen, [...] might have felt a stable connection between himself and the children” (*TBE* 126-8) – and who, “as it was,” loved his daughter in the only way he knew how, which was “based on what he felt at the moment,” and at that moment, “he wanted to fuck her – tenderly” (*TBE* 127-8). In various ways, society has, then, so conditioned and controlled Cholly, that the effect has been one of “denying him a socially acceptable means of expressing authentic emotion” (Byerman 187). Indeed, although “his touch was fatal,” Cholly, as a “model of sin and failure,” does not know what he is “supposed to do” as her father (*TBE* 163, 98, 127); for, “what could his calloused hands produce to make her smile? What could his heavy arms and befuddled brain accomplish that would earn him his own respect, that would in turn allow him to accept her love?” (*TBE* 127). Through her inscribing of the scene within the abstrusely feminine language of a “dreamlike, gentle dissolution of temporal boundaries,” Morrison thus skillfully “divests the rape of its masculine appeal” (Maxwell 204), providing, instead, a very sensitive portrayal of the psychological state of an incapacitated black fatherhood, and the “confused mixture of his memories of [his wife] and the doing of a wild and forbidden thing” (*TBE* 128). What is more, she effectively balances her empathy for the black male rapist’s social subjugation by ingeniously acknowledging the respective emotional and physical degradation of the specific female victim.

For the black male writer, rape is often “both a feeling and an act” that, in effect, “reduces the victim to a rather impersonal repository of the pent-up fury of the angry protagonist” (Maxwell 2014). Certainly for Wright, women are the insignificant casualties of an “imperiously driven” male rage; which, under a racial “programme of oppression,” must necessarily assume “such a brutal and violent form” (Wright 164, 6). In the case of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952), too, the shameful behaviour of Jim Trueblood, “a sharecropper who had brought disgrace upon the black community” by raping and impregnating his daughter, is evaluated almost exclusively by men, “who wanted to hear about the gal lots of times” (Ellison 46, 52). The female perspective on Trueblood’s act, on the other hand, is essentially silenced and relegated to the margin of this marginal lower class black male’s recounting of *his* sexual story. By filtering the rape entirely through Trueblood’s male consciousness, and likewise, by positioning Bigger’s suffering at the sole centre of his narrative, both Ellison and Wright thereby serve to augment the “existential distress of the rapist while diminishing the pain of the victim” (Maxwell 205). In Morrison’s text, however, it is first and foremost through Pecola’s “repulsive” pregnancy and “absurd” psychosis that the “total [...] damage done” by racism is addressed (*TBE* 162). The incestuous rape, in fact, merely serves to complete the racial gazing and scapegoating of Pecola that the reader has been viewing since the novel’s opening pages; ultimately confirming for the community her debased, disfigured, and distinctively black position amongst “all the waste and beauty of the world - which is what she herself was,” and which, by comparison, “decorated us,” “sanctified us,” “[silenced] our own nightmares” and “made us glow with health” (*TBE* 162-3). Consequently, Annette Kolodny contends that, when considered inter-textually, *The Bluest Eye* provides a marked example of a “revisionary reading” which opens “new avenues” for comprehending ‘male,’ if not specifically black American male, texts (1985 59).

Given that most black males “are encouraged through their uncritical acceptance of patriarchy to live in the past, to be stuck in time,” they are more often than not “stuck in the place of rage” (hooks, 2004 60). It is, of course, this “breeding ground for [...] acts of

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violence large and small” that in the end does “black men in,” for when they are “unable to move past reactive rage they get caught in the violence, colluding with their own psychic slaughter as well as with the very real deaths that occur when individuals see no alternatives” (hooks, 2004 64). *The Bluest Eye* is, therefore, exemplary of the extent to which “women’s imagination” can bring things “to the surface,” things that “men – trained to be men in a certain way – have difficulty getting access to” (Awkward 136). Indeed, although Pecola is ultimately “a tragic victim,” Morrison achieves a “triumph in giving her, who has never had a voice, a story in her own right” (Christian, 1980 198). Moreover, by weaving Pecola’s particular story into a “web of very different but interconnected narratives,” she effectively highlights how the “erasures of abstraction” occur in racial and gendered “layers,” rather than as “an absolute” (Werrlein 68). Thus, even while the actual incest scene may be, as Lynn Orilla Scott suggests, “rendered entirely from the father’s point of view,” unlike Ellison’s conspicuously male conceptualisation of incest, it is through the resultant destruction of the daughter, Pecola, that Morrison’s novel truthfully asks that we understand the relationship between “an ideology of white supremacy” and a “discourse of incest that promotes and maintains that ideology” (Orilla Scott 88-9). Claudia makes this connection when she compares her and her sister’s act of planting the marigolds with that of Cholly’s act of “[dropping] his seeds in his own plot of black dirt” (*TBE* 4). By changing the signification of ‘black dirt’ from a fruitful, fertile medium to a derogatory racial slur, Claudia demonstrates how Pecola becomes the depository not only of her father’s seed, but also, of “the land, of [her] town,” of an American culture so firmly indoctrinated with a racist discourse, that it equates black skin with moral degeneracy (*TBE* 164).

The Bluest Eye, in this sense, is primarily concerned with the power dynamics of racism, and, within that, how incest can be read as an ideological form of “social and racial control” used to “normalise cultural scripts about race and sex,” as well as to render other subjects and stories “unspeakable” (Orilla Scott 98). Notably, Orilla Scott has described how “incest stories and incest themes have provided specific challenges and opportunities for African American writers,” and this is precisely because “incest has long been associated

with the poor and with people of colour” (83). Morrison certainly demonstrates her engagement with the disciplinary power of incest discourse in the way she introduces the incest plot at the beginning of the novel, “as a site of interpretation - or, more to the point, as a site of misinterpretation” (Orilla Scott 88). In doing so, she effectively “deflates the explanatory power of the incest taboo and its violation” (Orilla Scott 88). The secret signified by the phrase, “quiet as it’s kept” (*TBE* 4), becomes, as a result, “more than a secret shared, but a silence broken” (Bouson 26). It becomes, in truth, not a story about “Pecola having her father’s baby” - which is, after all, known to the community and put to predictable use - but the “public exposure of a private confidence” (Bouson 26); a racist ‘confidence’ born of a cultural conviction of white superiority. In other words, Morrison at last speaks the unspeakable story of a black man, who has been so injected with fear, inferiority complexes, trepidation, servility, despair, and abasement - and all by virtue of the fact he has been rejected from purportedly godly ideals of patriarchal manhood and nuclear fatherhood - that he raises “a little black girl” who “yearns for the blue eyes of a little white girl,” and the “horror at the heart of her yearning is exceeded only by the evil of fulfilment” (*TBE* 162).

Chapter Four

“White pussy is nothin but trouble”:

Hypermasculine Hysteria and the Displacement of the Feminine Body in Cormac McCarthy’s *Child of God*

Too weak, for all her heart’s endeavour,
To set her struggling passion free
From pride, and vainer ties dissever,
And give herself to me for ever;
But passion sometimes would prevail,
Nor could to-night’s gay feast restrain
A sudden thought of one so pale
For love of her, and all in vain.

Robert Browning, *Porphyria’s Lover* (1836)

Apprehension over the status of white men in post-sixties American culture – the era in which ‘high’ Fordism decays and the period that Cormac McCarthy emerges as a published novelist – refers most directly to the political effects of feminism correlating with the changing tides of capitalism. ‘Second wave’ feminism was, of course, a response to the polarised ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ registers of being, which, according to David Savran, “monopolised American culture during the domestic revival that followed World War II” (170). Such reified gender demarcations, assured within culturally restricted principles of order and hierarchy, by and large promoted the “male [domestication] and [rationalisation] of women,” so as to ensure that ‘feminine’ would remain a synonym for ‘submissive,’ in contrast to the potency of the muscular working male, utilising his body as a righteous testament to his authoritative, autonomous manhood (Savran 170). In spite of the fact that a manufacture-based capitalist methodology routinely recognised the public sphere as an exclusively established ‘male domain,’ however, the increasingly seditious sites of convergence amongst gender processes and late capitalist economic circumstances affirmed an ever closer alignment of the feminine with mainstream culture; and, in so doing, ruptured those regulating fictions that consolidated and naturalised socio-economic, phallogocentric

supremacies. Issues surrounding men and masculinities significantly shifted because of this contingency, and the transfiguration of the sex role paradigm in the 1970s – to apply more immediately to questions of masculinity – exposed the many characteristically male traits that used to comprise the gender's strength and thus legitimise its hegemonic status, as a series of politically sanctioned and socially practised mechanisms of oppression.

For Sally Robinson, it follows that the heretofore-impervious masculine desire for “recognition and definition through conquest” respectively “marked” contemporary men as “hysterical” (1). The active male role, that is, lost its rugged clarity of outline, as the traditional means by which had defined their manhood were now recognised as symptoms of a multiplicity of psychopathologies. American men were, as such, no longer encouraged to show initiative or to exert their independence in a favourable way. Instead, the precarious capitalist economy that had begun to take shape during the late 1950s and '60s displaced the white male into a corporate arena that no longer offered a clear sense of what manhood meant. To this end, contemporaneous American authors such as McCarthy disclose a corollary master narrative of white male decline “clothed in the language of crisis,” and embrace a “vocabulary of pain and urgency” so as to foreground the historical, social, and economic decentring of what was formerly considered the normative patriarchal structure in the American cultural imagination (Robinson 1). McCarthy's third novel, *Child of God* (1973), is of particular relevance; for, although often undervalued in comparison to the author's later Western fictions, this Southern parable of the sad and sordid murderous necrophiliac Lester Ballard essentially embodies the malady of modern masculine disenfranchisement, consistently imbricated in the tension between social consciousness and the material world.

Before exploring McCarthy's novel in detail, it is worthwhile considering the extent to which this proposed ‘crisis’ of masculinity can be extrapolated more broadly in terms of the generalised crisis of identity associated with ‘postmodernism,’ or what Fredric Jameson defines as “the cultural logic of late capitalism” (1). According to Jameson, what ‘late’ ultimately underscores is the sense that “something has changed,” and that the new

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systematic cultural norm no longer obeys the laws of classical capitalism; namely, the primacy of industrial production (1). Jameson's contextualisation of late capitalism with "the development of postmodernism as the dominant cultural mode" (11), apprehends the new social formation in question as the force field in which different kinds of impulses - that which Raymond Williams terms "residual" and "emergent" forms of cultural production (6) - must make their way. The emergence of a "new kind of flatness or depthlessness," and the effective "mutation [of] the object world" in a "new culture of the image or the simulacrum," in other words, exemplifies the "supreme formal feature of postmodernism" (Jameson 9). Late capitalist society thereby ratifies a "new kind of superficial" mass-mediated culture, predicated upon an "existential model of [...] inauthenticity [over] authenticity, mass psychology [over] individual will and agency, and dependency [over] self-reliance" (Jameson 10). The juxtaposition of such forces against the traditional American ideologies of individualism - which have a deep attachment to the idea that only the "unmarked citizen has a claim to individualism," as well as the succeeding notion that the individual can only emerge in "contradistinction to those citizens marked by gender" (Robinson 9) - in turn deciphers these unfamiliar forces as 'feminising.' Thus, whilst feminists successively engendered an association of the feminine with the prevalent principles of society since the mid-sixties, men of the traditional mould could not but experience the same paradigm shift as deeply traumatic, suddenly confronting their habitual ways of seeing and acting as increasingly anachronistic.

Contemporaneous questions of maleness and what it means to be a man can therefore be recognised as symptomatic of the economic transition from a manufacture-based economy to a late-capitalist information based market; inclusively linking consumer culture with the feminine in a binary that identifies authenticity and creative individuality with the masculine. It does seem, however, riskily reductive to value this current crisis of masculinity in such predisposed phallogentric terms, as a symbolic feminisation of the masculine individual by effeminate social forces. Indeed, while there may be use in discerning this acute disruption in the dynamics of cultural pathology as a categorical

collapsing of those hitherto hegemonic orders normative masculinity relied so heavily upon, there are then dangers in reading Jameson's evaluation of postmodernism as an all-inclusive disposition of displacement. To this end, Kathleen Kirby argues that Jameson's model largely fails to stipulate the crisis in subjectivity that it depicts as largely a crisis "only for those subjects who previously were able to institute dominance over their surroundings," and does not account for the fact that "those dispossessed for centuries by the combinations of their class, race, or gender" find that fragmentation as not a new condition, "but an on going one" (Kirby 54). For her, Jameson's theory rather more indicates a "localised crisis" within the experience of a once dominant white American male subjectivity, which then endeavours to "universalise its own dislocation as a pervasive condition" (Kirby 54). The valorisation of such solitary modes in postmodern thinking is, in this sense, a self-evident appropriation that codes itself as the canonical model, and which, in turn, urges a certain publicly enhanced experience of fracture in global capitalism. This emergent narrative about the feminisation of American culture thereby accentuates the extent to which any achievement of masculine success remains consistently dependent on a kind of displaced abjection, socially shaped in opposition to the feminine and those unmasculine characteristics that continually threaten to undermine the patriarchal paradigm in modern American culture.

This fear of subjugation is, sure enough, expressed most fully in *Child of God* through the abject varieties of violence enacted on the female body by its protagonist, Lester Ballard. The remainder of this chapter will therefore be discussing McCarthy's early seventies text in this way, exploring the author's use of sexual murder, necrophilia, and voyeurism with regards to an interrelated interpretation of contemporaneous feminist and Marxist theory in order to emphasise a detrimental, but nevertheless fundamental linkage between the modern masculine condition and that of America's late capitalist economic structure. An examination of the progressive perversion of this "child of god" in such terms, will, then, effectually signal the novel's resolute engagement with the epochal processes of capitalist restructuring in which it is written (5); and, what is more, discern the protagonist's disturbing desires as a critical exegesis as opposed to an expression of latent antagonism

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toward women on the part of the author – since, after all, there is nothing ‘latent’ about Ballard’s actions. Indeed, instead of McCarthy, himself, demonstrating a machismo or misogyny that his own culture sanctions, the depiction of Ballard’s necrophilia rather reveals the systemically certified patriarchy of the author’s contemporaneous and commoditised world. This specific reading of the text clarifies the masculinist backlash against Second Wave Feminism and the rise of late capitalism in the US as being deeply connected, consigning the novel as a critique of these contextualising themes of an emergent sense of modern masculinity in crisis – themes which deepen throughout McCarthy’s corpus – in order to reclaim the novel’s interpretive and pivotal significance and counter previously dismissive feminist criticism of the novel.

Set in 1960s Sevier County, East Tennessee, *Child of God* introduces the rise of the newly liberated female presence as posing a directly emasculating threat over Ballard’s claim to a formerly dominant order of hegemonic manhood. For Ballard, the articulation of female sexual autonomy, assertively contesting “[he] ain’t got nothin [women] want,” serves to defuse the hierarchical binary opposition continually appropriated as a means of male definition (CG 74). Such disregard for female sexuality - as nothing more than an immediate menace to a prototypical authoritarian masculinity - subsequently results in Ballard’s serial relegation of female objects of desire beyond corporeality into victims that must be possessed as corpses for necrophiliac sex. In this manner, McCarthy directs Ballard’s murderous misogyny as a means to a practical, sexual end, adopting the theme of necrophilia so as to stress the reality of women as sexual property, and the extent to which man uses ‘objects’ to know himself at once as man and subject. *Child of God* can thus be read further as a gothic allegory, condemning the social ills of nationalistic ideals by positioning the serial killer as both reflective and symptomatic of an American culture of materialism. Ballard’s violent manifestations of excess, in point of fact, literalise the conjoining of mass production with mass consumption; as well as the consequential dilation of market, which decoupled income from productivity so as to transform society into a prodigious extension of commodity relations. David Holloway, as a result, characterises Ballard as McCarthy’s

“early sketching of the existential self saturated in market logic,” his organic unity of experience “penetrated by the inertia of capital,” and his every action thus colonised by the demands that this inertia afflicts upon him (131).

Certainly, by opening the novel where the moment of “carnival folk” is linked to the public auction of Ballard’s house, McCarthy immediately calls attention to the penetration of popular will by the logic of bourgeois commodification (*CG* 5). As the auctioneer’s pitch makes clear, “this timber is up here growin, [...] and they is no sounder investement than property” (5). The growth of trees is thereby measured as the expansion of capital itself, and the commodity form has been naturalised to such a degree that, while Ballard is expelled from his “property,” it is introduced as one merely contingent detail among others (5). In this kind of interpretation, the later scene wherein Ballard describes a “halfdollar’s worth” of “titties,” moreover denotes the imposition of such bourgeois social structures through the symbolic medium of the body; effectually establishing the ‘female’ body as one more piece of commodity matter in a pervasive market, with Ballard’s own masculine sexual desire also commoditised - in the economic transition proposed - as an inert factual thing (29). The disruptive delineation of the female body by way of mere exchange value, in turn, reveals the shape of Ballard’s social relations as nothing more than the enactment of those related structures that conclusively comprise social forms. The crucial associations among individuals are thus reduced to the form of interactions between “things,” and hence Robert Jarrett accordingly ascertains a link between Ballard’s emasculating regression to a dehumanising condition of “factual animality,” and the “structuring role of commodity and private property relations” in the life of the community from which he has been alienated (173). Ballard’s existential anguish, in this manner, is brought forth as a direct consequence of bourgeois socialisation, effectively governed by the “resentment of dispossession,” and the “commoditisation of existence” that institutes and inaugurates this inertia (Holloway 129).

Notably, Ballard’s masculinised evolvment throughout the novel subsequently takes the form of a willed regression of his own body, by which he seeks to “work” his own

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status in the “series as hunter and hunted thing” (Jarrett 177). He in turn reduces “all the trouble [he] was ever in” as having been “caused by [...] women,” and endeavours to employ the broader material relations of power and strategies of exploitation associated with neoliberal capitalism in terms of gender, so as to negate that which he cannot assimilate, and ultimately protect the centrality of his male subjectivity (*CG* 51). Ballard’s indulgence in a distinctly gendered violence, to this end, is strongly suggestive of an effort to reclaim a powerful masculine order through the violent reaffirmation of sexual difference. For Mark Seltzer, this potent reassertion of traditional gender configurations in the 1970s offered a forceful resolution to the set of deep and persistent fears on the part of a formerly dominant order that had inevitably begun to recognise that it was becoming residual. Yet, even as such violence becomes the American male’s most “emphatic way of securing or reaffirming self-difference,” David Savran regards this form of male violence as demonstrative of an essential humiliation; that is, as indicative of some “deeply rooted thing in the Anglo American male” that has to do with inferiority, “that has to do with not being a man,” and the indoctrinated belief that they must continually “act out some idea of manhood that is invariably violent” (Savran 144, 178). The ‘belief’ that men must continually act out some idea of manhood that is invariably violent principally serves, then, to diminish the intensity of shame, replacing it as far as possible with the anterior emotion of pride so as to prevent a male such as Ballard from being overwhelmed by that shame.

Significantly, Susan Bordo recognises the extent to which “female sexual independence” has been epitomised “as an enticement to brutal murder,” and classifies male psychosis as strongly suggestive of an effort to reclaim a powerful masculine order that demands firm resilience to what is perceived by patriarchy as being “weakness, subversion, and fragmentation” (1993 5). Mary Douglas, too, goes on to claim that the “series of related structures that comprise social forms [...] enact the shape of social relations,” and work upon the body politic “through the symbolic medium of the physical body” (128). Ballard’s turning outward to find a victim to suit his revenge can therefore be traced to a warped compulsion to recreate the ideal homogenised domestic scene, which he believes

may effectually “[make] things more orderly [...] in men’s souls” (*CG* 128). Indeed, his relationships with women frequently reimagine the body as a historical arena inscribed by the social and economic organisation of human life and, likewise, brutalised by it. McCarthy nevertheless initially sets out to obscure any conventional corporeal gender distinction by presenting Ballard’s father, following his suicide by hanging, as mere passive, vegetative matter, “just [...] hanging [...] like [...] meat” (22). The grotesque spectacle of his father’s corpse, as Ballard “stood there and watched,” juxtaposed against the absence of his mother after she “run off,” inverts the culturally manipulated duality of the active, invisible male spirit counter to the passive, hypervisible female body (22). As Gail Kern Paster argues, the female body is persistently professed in the western canon as “naturally grotesque,” which is to say, “open, permeable, leaky,” and thereby insidiously associated with death (92). The male body is, by contrast, elevated as “naturally whole, closed, opaque, self-contained and conscious,” and so to be otherwise signifies as a failure of physical self-mastery, which is both shameful and feminising (Paster 92). The invisible and defining authority of the masculine subject - which has habitually sought to normalise and naturalise itself beyond classification - is thus subverted here as Ballard’s father is objectified in terms of the gaze. This “display of the wounded [male] body,” of course,” becomes a gross materialisation of the “crisis of white masculinity,” threatening to expose the lie of “disembodied normativity” so often attached to white masculinity (Robinson 9). That Ballard “never was right after his daddy killed hisself” (*CG* 22) consequently suggests his violent actions are wrought from this patriarchal breakdown, and moreover acknowledges the hostility of perversion as a response to trauma.

It is, then, this fantasy of a commanding and controlling violent masculinity that may alternatively afford Ballard the kind of armouring which, according to Hal Foster, not only wills the obliteration of “inferiorised bodies,” but also seeks in the process to repress “the point where the masculine subject confronts its greatest fear: its own fragmentation, disintegration, and dissolution” (Foster 94). McCarthy thus predominantly presents Ballard as a “mute, [...] ill shaven man [...] holding a rifle [...] with a constrained truculence” (*CG* 172

5-6). This sinister parody of the “the American pastoral type of the frontiersman,” whose formative experience was, according to Georg Guillemin, “regeneration through confrontation with, and survival in, the American wilderness,” works in clear correspondence with the frontier ideology of the American west, and accordingly affiliates Ballard with the “rugged western hero of American mythology” (Guillemin 51). It is important to realise, however, that while a solitary figure breaking free from the community would, in the traditional Western sense, be considered a male hero; in the fiction of most Southern writers, he becomes “less of a hero,” and closer to that which Robert Brinkmeyer terms “a potential psychopath [...] cut off from the nourishing bonds of family and community” (4). In very simple terms, if we consider the depiction of Ballard as a solitary, self-sufficient male in the Western genre sense, he emerges with a superlatively hardened masculine form; namely, as a purified and symbolically armoured figure, equipped to enforce a corporeal distinction fortified to annihilate “phantasmatic threats to the normative social ego” (Foster 65). Yet given the reality of his specifically Southern settings, Ballard, as it happens, devolves into something close to a perverted primate, “evicted from his land” and “sleeping with his murder victims [...] in cave” (Brinkmeyer 4).

This geographic, thematic distortion, of course, allows McCarthy to highlight the essential hypocrisy at the heart of the male western tradition, which, by definition, relies on the historical exclusion of women. It is through Ballard’s narrow depreciation of women with sexuality and corporeality - and subsequent deeming of the female body as the grotesque and abject antithesis to the classical male body - that McCarthy, in truth, showcases the extent to which women have come to embody that which, in Julia Kristeva’s words, “disturbs identity, system, and order,” and the “disrupting of social boundaries” demanded by the symbolic” (90). Indeed, in the modern era, “as female sexuality is staged as the pre-eminent site of [...] death,” Christine Buci-Glucksmann argues that women’s bodies are the “ultimate threat to men” (224). Ballard’s disdain for female sexuality as nothing more than a disordered aggravation to his conceivable masculinity thereby underscores the hierarchy of male-supremacist ideology, which correspondingly warrants Ballard’s

unrestricted masculine entitlement to the female body. His denunciation of “white pussy” as “nothin but trouble” (*CG* 51), as a matter of fact foregrounds the feminine as nothing more than a sexual organ, thus dissociating female sexuality from any unified body and reducing the desired object beyond corporeality and into a commoditised state of victimised passivity for serial copulation. The violent desublimation of the female body to the sole demarcation of her ‘pussy’ exemplifies the masculine desire to “immobilise” and “petrify” the ambiguous and abject feminine body, with Ballard appropriating the feminine to an object he may control and order according to his own foremost fantasies (Buci-Glucksmann 224). The murderous violation of women, to be precise, confers upon Ballard the sovereignty that he has been elsewhere denied in the communal order, effectively serving to disorder the world so as to reorder it as a dominion according to his own desires.

Ballard’s masculine sexuality, needless to say, does not grow from, nor does it express the lives of women, but rather transpires in the form of necrophilia, with the dead (female) body a mere embodiment of the congealed labour that exemplifies the commodity form. Erich Fromm notably describes the necrophilious person of which Ballard is typical, as being “driven by the desire to transform the organic into the inorganic,” and to approach life “mechanically,” as if all living persons were things [to be] controlled and ordered” (1973 41). Ballard’s fashioning of his “pale [female] cadavers” into “crude mannequins [...] [dressed] in new clothes” (*CG* 91) certainly confirms the extent to which he values these “rancid mold crept” (164) corpses as personal possessions, and furthermore adheres to Fromm’s identification of “possession,” and that “love [of] control,” as the only means by which the necrophiliac may “relate to an object [whether] a flower or a person” (1973 41).

McCarthy makes this connection explicit through the tableau of the first asphyxiated couple in the car - arranged “like beautiful flowers that will never decay” (82) - which has by some means distorted Ballard’s ability to perceive of people as more than mere attainable objects. McCarthy’s reference to “flowers,” in the same way as Fromm, reflects the attractive, yet consumable and perishable value of a commodity, which, Catherine MacKinnon argues, “is always “destroyed in the end by its use when it is used to the fullest”

(117). McCarthy's discreetly descriptive stylisation of Ballard's female victims by means of "gauze ferns" and "roses of burgundy crepe" (CG 141), altogether "[gathered] for the master's bouquet," thus permits a further analysis by the reader, with regards to female beauty in terms of desecration (82). In this kind of interpretation, Ballard's murderous misogyny, "transforming all that is alive into dead matter," is brought forth as an indictment of the reality of women as sexual chattel, emphasising the extent to which man uses objects, sensate beings called objects as a matter of course, to feel his own power and presence and know himself at once as man and as subject (Fromm, 1973 348).

Significantly, Andrea Dworkin makes the profound point that dominant feminist discourse on the body in the sixties and seventies established the female body as "deeply inscribed within an ideological construction of femininity," and hence as a socially shaped and historically "colonised" territory (103); reduced to that aspect with which the male is able to cope. In this regard, Ballard's preference for inanimate women - who do not share, respond, or challenge his masculine authority as he tells them "[they've] been wantin it" (CG 97) - and whose movements he alone controls "so [they can't] run off" (76), encapsulates the imposition of phallocentric discipline on female subjectivity; discipline that produces subjected and practiced "docile bodies" (Foucault 28).

According to Foucault, through the production of docile bodies is forced "a policy of coercions that act upon the body" (28); that is to say, a calculated manipulation of its elements, its gestures, its behaviour. It is important to note, however, that Foucault is very much blind to those disciplines that produce a modality of embodiment that is peculiarly feminine, and McCarthy's text rather uses Foucault's interpretation so as to highlight a modernisation of patriarchal domination that unfolds historically according to the general pattern described by Foucault. This is most evident through the author's subtle manipulation of language as Ballard manoeuvres his first female corpse from the attic, and the way in which McCarthy attributes this "wooden figure" with autonomy; describing how "*she* came down the ladder until [...] *she* was standing" (CG 97; emphasis added). By referring to her with feminine pronouns and counterpointing her puppet-like movement with active verbs as

if she were still capable of volition, McCarthy effectively portrays the extent to which a “mechanics of power” not only defines how one may have a “hold over other’s bodies” so that they “may do what one wishes,” but so that they may “operate as one wishes,” with the techniques and the efficiency that one determines” (Foucault 30). McCarthy employs this approach again at the end of the novel, when the bodies of Ballard’s victims are eventually found in an underground “mausoleum,” and taken in as “Property of the State of Tennessee” (CG 185). Each exhumed female body is described in much the same way as Ballard’s first victim, paradoxically accredited autonomy as “*she* ascended dangling,” as “*she* sloughed in the weem of the noose” (186; emphasis added). The author is, of course, underscoring the extent to which female subjectivity is habituated and subordinated by “external regulation, subjection transformation, and improvement” (Foucault 32). In repeating the same technique at the close of the novel, McCarthy further critiques the culturally sanctioned misogyny of his own contemporaneous world, which extends above and beyond the individual story of Ballard, revealing the social institution that is central in reproducing male power by keeping women in a state of subjugation.

The scene in which Ballard obtains his first female victim, “taking off all her clothes and looking at her, inspecting her body carefully, as if he would see how she were made” (CG 87), epitomises this disciplinary invasion and violation of the female form, and in effect forcibly brings Ballard into fixed correlation with that “machinery of power” that explores, breaks down, and rearranges” the body (Foucault 28). In clear adherence with Mark Seltzer’s American serial killer profiling, Ballard’s oppressive and egalitarian system of sexual subordination imposes a relation of docility-utility within which woman must conform to the male’s definition of her as an object with respect to function as well as form, thus demonstrating the “normalisation of violence as a part of the psychopathology of male every day life” (Seltzer 141). In view of that, the episode in which Ballard shops for his female cadaver at a “dry goods store, where in the window a crude wood manikin headless and mounted on a pole wore a blowsy red dress,” moreover reflects a gendered and Marxist interpretive coherence, with the “manikin” serving as a prop for Ballard’s consumerism, as

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well as the model for his imitation females (*CG* 92). It is worth recognising, as such, the way in which Ballard not only shows immediate interest in the synthetic figure displayed, asking “how much [the] red dress out front [is]” (92), but what is more, engages in this material image further, inquiring as to whether “you [...] got them drawers in the red [to] go pretty with [the] dress?” (94). Ballard’s pursuit of material beauty and desire along these lines involves an attempt to capture a falsified ideal of which the stylized female model is a mere flat shadow; and hence when asked “what size” the cadaver needs, he is unable to answer, for “he’d never seen the girl standing up” (92). In failing to acknowledge or account for the dimensions of his ‘personal’ female cadaver, this scene highlights the extent to which Ballard’s direct desire - in a patriarchal process of fetishisation - is principally focused upon the “headless [...] manikin [...] out front” and the reproduction of his attained corpse to match this artificial form (91). Ballard’s “[brushing] her hair with the dime store brush he’d bought,” and “[painting] her lips [...] [with] lipstick” (97) likewise crystallizes the pathological process by which the ideal body of femininity is constructed - a body on which the decorative is incorporated into its definition, and on which a frivolous and inferior status has been inscribed.

The ‘making-up’ of the female face is in point of fact a highly stylized activity; by which a homogenised, elusive ideal of femininity is fabricated and which, as a result, pleases men for the very reason it makes them appear more masculine by contrast. For Diane Luce, Ballard’s fashioning of the female form into a personal “play pretty” (*CG* 73) represents his crafting a “doll out of a human being,” and becomes the means by which he experiences himself and his desire, his male supremacy depending on his ability to view women as sexual objects (Luce 141). Jane Caputi congruently understands the ‘doll’ as a classical icon in patriarchal and pornographic culture because it not only “profanes the once sacred female body and image,” but also because it so purely betokens “the man-made woman, the veritable object of possession” (172). Caputi further explains the extent to which men frequently and profoundly express “desires for dead women,” and seem unable or unwilling to distinguish between “phalloglamour and female reality” (176). In this way, the lifelike

qualities of a woman substitute for the imperfection and danger of living life itself. Ballard kills, that is, in the Bakhtinian sense of “consuming the world” so as “to tame our fear of it” (296). This suggests that what Ballard really desires is an ersatz gratification, which both preserves his power and distances him from any potential emasculating encounter. He therefore creates such a simulacrum by resorting to a series of substitutes; valuing the likeness of a woman over a woman herself, and seeking erotic fulfilment “not with a person,” but, Gary Ciuba argues, “with a gussied-up pretence of femininity,” ultimately modelled on masculinist idealisation (178).

Certainly, within the structures and strictures of culture and society - that which Jacques Lacan describes as the ‘symbolic order’ - the male subject is incapable of controlling his own desires since “those desires are themselves separated from actual bodily needs” (Lacan, 1977 142). Through the mediation of late capitalist culture, Ballard’s desires are, in truth, never properly his own, but are created through partially placed fantasies caught up in cultural ideologies. Ballard consequently “divorces [himself] from the materiality of [his] desires,” caught up in his own “idealised images” that are “ultimately narcissistic” (Lacan, 1977 40). The desires of Ballard are, in other words, positioned in relation to the particular objectivity of the female and necessarily reliant on a “lack,” since fantasy, by definition, “does not correspond to anything in the real” (Lacan, 1977 40). Ballard’s object of desire, or “objet petit a,” thus works as a medium for him to establish the coordinates of his own desire, and at the heart of this desire is a “misrecognition of fullness” where there is nothing but a “screen for [his] own narcissistic projections” (Lacan, 1977 40). McCarthy makes this point most apparent through Ballard’s cross-dressing, as “he’d long been wearing the underclothes of his female victims, but now he took to appearing in their outerwear as well,” and in so doing, incarnates a “gothic doll in illfit clothes” (CG 132). This grotesque parody of the feminine efficaciously demonstrates Ballard’s “introjection of, and identification with, his female victims,” so that he may finally “seize the very identity of his victims,” and appropriate their bodies until what is left is a pure physicality upon which he may project his own machismo identity (Jarrett 132).

Luce Irigaray identifies “feminine masquerade” as the submission of the female subject to a “set of male-defined roles and scripts” (133). By enacting the “trajectory of male desire” across the “feminine body which is his own,” Ballard thus implicitly communicates the will of masculine authority and a compliance with its command, reproducing the relation of “male artist to an objectified female subject” (Irigaray 133). Indeed, by way of transforming female flesh into merely one more embodiment of the commodity universe - wearing a “fright wig [...] fashioned whole from a dried human scalp” (*CG* 164) – Ballard’s forced extroversion of all interiority, and the imposed introjection of all exteriority, embodies the “phallocentric erasure of the female sex” (Irigaray 135).

Significantly, Ballard’s apprehension of the female body is similarly manifest in terms of a “narcissistic scopophilia,” which, in Laura Mulvey’s words, “abstracts” the identity of the female through the desire of the patriarchal gaze (9). This notably compels us to identify only with him, the “male conqueror,” which in turn means it is the transsexed image of himself for whom Ballard lusts, and the reduction of ‘woman’ to pure symbolic matter ultimately allows him to annihilate any genuine female presence and represent the world according to his own exquisite point of view (Mulvey 9). By the same token, Susan Sontag argues that “to photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have,” it turns people into “objects” that can be “symbolically possessed” (14). Although Ballard never photographs his female victims, his spectacularised proscopoeia - as he “[arranges] her in different positions and [goes] out [to] peer in the window at her” (*CG* 97) – arguably frames the female figure within a screened space, and ultimately entraps the woman via her halted image. Voyeuristic vision is, then, mimicked here by “archaeological vision,” whereby women are not only turned into the sexualised aim of the scopophilic gaze, but also, Andrew Bartlett argues, “into the artefacts for and by that gaze” (9). The representation of the world, like the world itself, is thus encoded with patriarchy, wherein women become exchange objects “created in the image of, and as, things” (MacKinnon 516).

In view of that, Hillary Gamblin's interpretation of Ballard's necrophilia as a "yearning for companionship" is somewhat problematic, inferring that he "does not see women as objects but as living beings that he can develop a relationship with" (33). According to Gamblin, Ballard's "intimacy" with his first female cadaver should be read "beyond sexuality," and rather as a demonstrative reverence, "incorporating the woman into his living space" (32). Although there is value in Gamblin's contention that Ballard's perversion is derivative from "his isolation from society," it is misleading to conclusively accept her analysis of his female interactions as "romantic [...] relationships," because this discounts the extent to which McCarthy deliberately allegorises Ballard's "encounters with objects" so as to critique the male-centred metaphysical representation of the feminine in materialistic culture (Gamblin 29). This is apparent in the fact that Ballard does not "incorporate" the female body "into his living space" (Gamblin 32), but quite literally stores "the dead girl in the other room [...] for keeping" (CG 88). In this manner, Ballard's domesticity more precisely reflects what John Berger identified as the social reality in which "to be born a woman is to be born into an allotted and confined space, into the keeping of men" (46). Thus, while Gamblin may determine the holding of the body in the attic as "Ballard's wish for [her] [...] protection, [...] not separation," this delineation inevitably authorises the raw manifestation of that patriarchal restrictive order grounded in a nostalgic tradition of imposed limitations (33).

Nevertheless, Gamblin's recognition of Ballard's need to "[create] a living [...] community" (29) is critically constructive, as it accordingly grounds Ballard's psychosis in his fundamental "disconnection from the real," a condition of which the murders and sexual crimes he commits are only shocking symptoms. The extent to which Ballard is compelled toward imitations of domesticity - and which he is ultimately only able to ostensibly obtain through the simulacrum of courtship, "[pouring] into that waxed ear everything he'd ever thought of saying to a woman" (CG 84) - highlights such an illusory relationship with 'reality.' For Jean Baudrillard, this flat and fetishized spectacularisation of the 'other' connotes a specific "devastation of the real," subsequently signifying the replacement of the

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“hot symbolic” by the “cold obscene” (1988 127). With regards to our reading of masculinity in McCarthy’s text, this embroils the sexual reality of women in a necrophiliac depletion of the feminine body, as they are transposed from “something living” into “something dead [involving] no reciprocity” (Baudrillard, 1988 127). Significantly, Jay Ellis regards Ballard’s “emotional isolation” as a result of his “spectralization of the other,” as he exhibits a “preference for a mental image that is an idealised and flat representation” (34). Ballard’s retreat into a world of abstractions, in this sense, reveals his own vulnerable state, which Vereen Bell stipulates as a “parody of innocence” (54). The fact that Ballard thinks he can suspend time furthermore calls attention to his “[obliviousness] to reality,” for flux means only deprivation and diminution to him, and hence various images ensue in the early stages of his exile to reinforce this ambiguous truth (Bell 54).

For example, at the fireworks display, in a single affecting scene, Ballard experiences at some level of consciousness “pure metaphors of transience” (Bell 54). Amidst the “loosely falling ribbons of hot spectra soon burnt to naught,” he glimpses a “womanchild from beyond her years, [her] face [floating] past, bland and smooth as cream” (CG 61-2). For Ballard, this “womanchild” personifies the “archetypal male dream of women in time” (Bell 62), yet the reference to her hair “[smelling] of *soap*” (CG 62) draws a direct parallel to the “gray *soapy* clots of matter [which] fell from [a] cadaver’s chin” at the close of novel (186). McCarthy’s descriptive attention to detail then works to dispel Ballard’s illusory temporality, and, moreover, undermines his protest against the passing of time. Images of seasonal renewal in the novel reinforce the sense of time’s inevitable passage. The “rich bloom of honeysuckle” (21), which corresponds with Ballard’s initial voyeurism, resurfaces near the end of novel when Ballard “[emerges] from the earth” to find “the faint bloom of honeysuckle already on the air” (181). This repeated image situates Ballard’s actions throughout the novel alongside the continual progression of those seasonal processes.

In spite of this, however, Ballard’s resolute attempt to defy the cultivation of those natural processes of time is persistently reiterated, as seen when he enters the store and asks the storekeeper to “put [the bill] on the stob” (CG 117). The storekeeper informs him that “at

this rate, it's goin to taken a hundred and ninety-four years to pay out the [bill] [...] if you don't buy nothin else," and he himself is already "sixty-seven now" (117-8). Jameson notably identified the process of commodification as commanding the relative isolation of the present from the "protentively and retentively constituted flow of time" (717). By attempting to delay his payment process, this scene thus effectively draws attention to Ballard's desire to remain in a state of arrested time, through which he may rupture any conventional perception of historical temporality, and thereby retain a sense of stability from the ecological coherence of his environment, both human and inhuman.

This sense of a splintered present is evident throughout the novel, as Ballard is endlessly entrapped by his skewed sensitivity to temporality, and so completely detached from any previous moorings or groundings. His deviant sexuality and his preceding alienation can be appreciated in this sense as an attempt to put back together the bodies of the dead within "a timeless order," one which, John Grammer asserts, is "immune to change" (40). To this end, Ballard's pathologies demonstrate that his unconscious knows what it is that he misses, and his necrophilia thus has a prior source in his "unprotected exposure to raw time," and his conditioned belief that life - namely the domestic intimacies of family and home - is what is lost (Bell 64). This is made clear when, lying awake in his cave, Ballard thinks he hears his father "whistling [...] on the road coming home," but then all that he really hears is the "sound [of] the stream where it ran down through the cavern to empty [...] in unknown seas at the centre of the earth" (*CG* 162). Ballard's corresponding grief, as "he watched the diminutive progress of all things [...] and [began] to cry" (161), acknowledges that "time is natural," and, for that reason, portends "all that he himself cannot be" (Bell 63).

As a result, Ballard is only willing and able to experience the 'past' as real, thereby aligning his necrophilia with the capitalist structure of society. Following the works of Karl Marx, Fromm contends that capital is the manifestation of the past - "of labour transformed and amassed into things" (1973 339) - which accounts for the way in which Ballard attempts to secure his masculine self-worth in the material reality of what he possesses. However, the

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existential stability Ballard achieves through materially obtaining women as objects, along with the psychotic power he displays through physically embodying the female form, renders him completely dependent on the use of things to experience self. In this sense, his loss of autonomy can be understood as the formation of a syncretic unity that dissolves the corporeal distinction between masculine subject and consumer object. By transforming everything into a commodity, Ballard is, in truth, imperilled by the ever expanding nature of capitalism, which continually needs to revolutionise itself in order to create new markets, “leaving nothing solid or permanent in its wake” (Marx and Engels 11). In this manner, “all that is solid melts into air,” and McCarthy embraces this metaphysical metaphor with strong intent, as seen through the two corresponding images of Ballard’s first and final female victims (Marx and Engels 11). Ballard refers to his first female cadaver as a “Goddamn frozen bitch,” and she is, for that reason, established by the cold and concrete reality of her physical form (CG 96). Yet after “[getting] [the] fire going in the hearth” so that “she was limber enough to undress,” Ballard is unable to save her from the “huge orange boils of fire,” and is reduced to “[poking] through the ashes with a stick,” not finding “so much as a bone, [...] as if she’d never been” (102). Similarly, the description of Ballard’s last evident victim in the narrative - having just been shot, and “[dropping] as if the bones in her body had been liquefied” - precisely personifies that Marxist language of ‘melting,’ as “she slumped into the mud” (CG 143). The female body as profaned by Ballard is, along these lines, exemplary of the evanescent nature of capitalism, as it is both destroyed and conjured into an elemental abstraction along the way. The fact that Ballard, “a man beset by some ghastr succubus,” is still very much in thrall to the feminine body, rather than in possession of it, thus calls attention to the lack that is inherent in commodity relations, and the desire - yet ultimate failure - to possess the venerated object; which is, in Ballard’s case, female sexuality (144).

Indeed, even though the death of women at his hands might seem to Ballard a subjective surmounting of the commodity matter that threatens his existence under a regime of scarcity, to suggest that Ballard sexually slaughters women because women’s bodies are normatively defined in his community as commodity matter, and because commodity matter

is the cause of his alienation, returns us once more to the far broader problem of exchange value itself. Ballard's murderous necrophilia, in this way, functions as an extended metaphor specifically for American consumerism, and the homogenising reduction of all life in the bourgeois market to a status determined by the logic of exchange value. Significantly, Slavoj Žižek argues that, in a society whereby the products of human labour acquire the form of commodities, the "crucial relations amongst individuals" are reduced to the form of "social relations between things" (2009 33). This critical shift from "inter-subjective relations" to a reified antagonism "between things" (Žižek, 2009 34), in turn marks Ballard's displaced desire for female bodies over female company together with "the hysteria of conversion" proper to capitalism; where "it is not the illusion masking the real state of things," but that of an "unconscious fantasy structuring the social reality itself" (Marx 77). In consequence, Bell transcribes the truly "horrifying" aspect of Ballard's "ghoulish family" to be that it is "less like an underground city of the dead," than it is a "monstrous doll-house where the corpses [...] become facsimile people" (Bell 61). The point, therefore, is not simply that there is no discrepancy between normality and abnormality, but that in assaulting that distinction, McCarthy's literary contempt of the 'normal' becomes a specific kind of perversion. It follows that Ballard is emblematic of the very society from which he arises, for his secular community of corpses connote the "implosion of social relations into commodity fetishism" (Baudrillard, 1970 69).

According to Marx, when we are victims of "commodity fetishism," it appears as if "the commodity (its use value)," is an expression of its "abstract universality (its exchange value)" (77). Needs are thus directed not so much towards objects as towards values, and their satisfaction initially has the sense of signing up to those values. With the "humans of the age of affluence" progressively coming to be "surrounded not so much by other humans, but by objects," Baudrillard consequently determines the consumer object to be never merely itself, but always at the same time "an indication of the absence of a human relationship" (1970 193). In other words, as everything conspires to make objects into the fodder of relationships, Ballard's social reality itself becomes a structured network of commodity

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exchange - which is most apparent when he “picked up the [dead] girl’s panties from the floor and sniffed them and put them in his pocket” (CG 84). Ballard’s misrecognition that the “flimsy pastel [garment]” is in fact an immediate property of female sexuality, underlines his fundamental inability to differentiate between material things and human life (92). Furthermore, the fact that he proceeds to buy new lingerie for the same female cadaver, then “[opens] the parcels from town, [...] [holds] up the garments and [sniffs] them,” suggests a further disarticulation of the ‘real’ into successive and equivalent signs, accentuating Ballard’s descent into materialism (96). The new garments have no actual attachment to any woman, but are rather signifiers of a femininity shaped by fetishistic inversion, and which thereby allow Ballard to experience his own masculinity as guided by a fetishistic illusion. Satisfaction is, as such, measurable only in terms of the command of visible criteria, exemplifying the self-perpetuating phenomenon of consumerism, which coerces subjects into using a system of signs that affects their methods of communication and interaction.

In this sense, Ballard’s collection of corpses counterpart the “levees of junk and garbage” presided over by the upturned remains of two dead cars “like wrecked sentinels” (CG 67). Their status as reduced artefacts of desublimated culture moreover positions these “pale gray [...] rotting [...] bodies” as representative of the anti-climax implicit in commodity fetishism, and exposes the obscenity of advanced capitalist productivity geared to excessive waste (186). In this regard, Seltzer contends that “the question of serial killing” cannot be separated from the “general forms of seriality and counting conspicuous in consumer culture,” and the “collecting of things [...] like bodies [...] that traverse it” (64). Ballard’s initial attraction to one “very pretty [...] dead girl” (CG 83), malformed into the obsessive assemblage of “the bodies of a number of people” (185), thus constitutes his coupling of logicism and eroticism within a male hysteria, which moves to restore agency through a “[capitalist] appetite for [...] others” (Marx 256). His degeneration into the logic of capitalist accumulation likewise links necrophilia to the capitalist structure, predicated on the “control of bureaucratic and mechanistic society” (Fromm, 1973 57). As a murderous necrophiliac, Ballard embodies the product of a fully developed capitalism that is centred on

the market; his violent behaviour possessed by that alienating imperative to consume, and relentlessly tied to his vision of a world in which everything has been commodified, “with himself as collector” (Jarrett 53).

Ballard, as a matter of fact, frequently experiences his body as a hyper-masculinised mechanism, “labouring over a cold corpse” (*CG* 84), and altogether solicited by “the styles of serial reproduction” that “disarticulate the natural body [and] make up machine culture” (Seltzer 63). His deviant decline into the sadistic semblance of a human being, “steam sifting” from his “heart [which] lay in his chest like a stone” (*CG* 110, 144), furthermore serves to demonstrate his modification by the capitalist longing to “reduce to a minimum the resistance offered by that repellent yet elastic natural barrier - man” (Marx 256). For Marx, while the implements of labour became automatic, “in place of the isolated machine” there was “a mechanical monster whose body [filled] whole factories,” and whose “demon power” at length broke out into “the furious whirl of countless working organs” (503). The human dimension is thus occluded by the materialism of consumer society, with Ballard’s inexplicable “dream of slaverous lust” disclosed as no more than the pathological product of the economic horizons in which he is forced to live, and he no more than an animated automaton (*CG* 20). This traumatised intimation to all intents and purposes presents Ballard’s psychic ego as thoroughly subject to the social ego; overwhelmed by its collective forces and fantasies. The apparently individual resolution of this “demented hero” (147) thereby simply represents the choice of conformity, for his “disastrous wrath” only serves to maintain the paradigmatic social model within which he is made (149). In this respect, the archetype of the ideal masculine self is functionally designed through a variety of harmful physical and mental procedures that recurrently manipulate men to feel inherently incapable of directing their own affairs. According to Deborah Cameron and Elizabeth Frazer, this paradoxical submission to an obsessive, domineering brutality subsequently casts the serial killer’s actions as the “pathological symptom of a certain kind of masculinity,” determined largely by the “society that produced them” (169)

As women are asked to “play dolls with themselves,” men are, then, “invited to play soldiers,” and hence Ballard’s immobilisation of the female form simultaneously exposes his own docile and dependent pacification to the dominant paradigm in modern American culture (Baudrillard, 1970 97). In illustrating Ballard as a “slouched and solitary” figure, “the rifle hanging in his hand as if it were a thing he could not get shut of” (*CG* 39), McCarthy effectively portrays Ballard as the “bedraggled parody of a patriotic poster,” and foregrounds this American imperial contradiction, which valorised toughness on the one hand and obedience and conformity on the other (147). As Aaron Belkin saliently outlines, the expression of such “imperial contradictions in, on, and through male bodies,” served to “camouflage and contain them,” and thereby required, as well as sustained, “more idealisation, more dissimulation, [and] more paranoia than would have been the case in the absence of imperial stakes” (5). In calling attention to this fundamentally unattainable model of masculinity that American men such as Ballard so often found themselves chained to, McCarthy, then, deliberately highlights the masculine imperative to perform and dominate as a repressive hindrance to men themselves. So while the rifle may embolden a sense of masculine conviction for Ballard, the fact that he is unable divorce himself from his association with the phallic weapon, suggests a critical consciousness on McCarthy’s part, of American masculinity as a preordained burden.

In view of that, scholars such as Nell Sullivan, who condemn McCarthy’s text as a display of pure “narrative misogyny,” fail to recognise that within the “crystallization of the dead girlfriend motif” resides the fundamental systemic violence of capitalism; a violence no longer attributable to specific individuals and their ‘criminal’ intentions (Sullivan 68). The fact that Ballard is incapable of perceiving a positive order in the world, assuming the principle that “all things fought,” rather contextualises serial killer mythology as the surfacing of that “underground” value organisation, which positions violence as a central component of America’s cultural psyche (*CG* 169). According to Richard Maxwell Brown, although violence is clearly rejected as a part of the American value system, so great has their involvement with violence been over the long sweep of American history that it has

“truly become part of [their] unacknowledged value structure” (41). By this means, Ballard becomes something like a monstrous aberration and a norm at the same time, bringing forth an unconscious moral decay on the social and individual level, as his actions become not so totally dissociated from the people of Sevier County. His perverse needs and behaviour therefore have at least vague affinities with those of American culture, and due to the narration being so methodically decentralised from the opening of the novel, it seems very deliberately intended to be “as much about the place and the people as about Ballard himself” (Bell 54).

The remarkable admission of Ballard as “a child of god much like yourself perhaps,” and the wider cultural currency afforded by McCarthy’s frequent use of “you” in reference to the reader, in this manner, unnervingly exposes the crude historical, economic, and political realities of patriarchal society lurking beneath this gothic allegorization of the human condition (*CG* 6). The story of Lester Ballard is, as follows, “assembled [...] for some purpose other than his” (141), and told in such a way as to disparage society’s creation of its own scapegoat villains, depicting the existential alienation and angst of this “child of god” as eternally “sustained by his fellow men, like you” (147). McCarthy’s repeated indulgence in a direct second-person commentary by the townspeople, whereby Ballard’s female victims are scorned as “more’s the fool” (*CG* 100), should therefore be read beyond Sullivan’s insinuation of “narrative misogyny” (68), and rather as an allegorical awareness and insistent indictment of an American culture of voyeurism, within which Ballard functions as a “practitioner of ghastriness” for our essential displacement (*CG* 165). To this end, the depiction of Ballard as “some slapstick contrivance of the filmcutter’s art,” highlights his societal designation to the role of “part time ghoul” (165), and, moreover, his eerie enslavement to the “flickering [...] wallward eye” of the community (6). It is, thus, significant that we are only made aware of Ballard’s humanness at the point in which it is irrevocably extinguished, “laid out on a slab and flayed, eviscerated and dissected” (184). It is through this paradox that McCarthy, in truth, forces the status of humanness itself to seem intolerably ambiguous and frail in the un-implicated, insentient otherness of the world. It is

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similarly along these lines that McCarthy conceives Ballard as a “berserk version of fundamental aspects of ourselves,” calling attention to “our fear of time, our programmed infatuation with death, our loneliness, our narcissistic isolation from the world,” and the “reality of other people,” so as to allow for a decisive mediation upon the peculiar and precarious poetry of violence (Bell 55).

With this in mind, it is beneficial to consider the ways in which McCarthy adopts themes central to the generic conventions of the Southern Gothic - those of miscegenation, sexual deviance, and bloody violence – so as to instruct insights into exactly which unpalatable realities the South has repressed in its own vision of itself. McCarthy’s work is, as a result, so concretely grounded within Southern Appalachia that it is, in fact, not wholly confined to its environmental or temporal locality, but is able to articulate much broader cultural concerns without leaving behind the materiality of the text. Thus, while criticism of this novel may tend to de-historicize its analysis, it is not exclusively dependent on the knowledge of either its specific historical or geographical setting, and is rather poised upon laying bare a variety of comprehensive contradictions underlying mainstream conceptions of American masculinity. Indeed, although McCarthy’s Southern story evokes a particular national consciousness of commodity culture in the late-sixties, it is at the same time not just about it, and therefore is able to speak to American national identity, and critique masculinity in America as a whole. By acknowledging an awareness of this temporal tension, it is furthermore possible to outline the broader relations of capitalism with regards to cultural constructions of gender, and subsequently diagnose the cessation of community by capital as the underlying source of Lester Ballard’s “lost litany” (CG 8).

In this respect, McCarthy figures American economic, social, and spiritual life as a series of injurious initiations, promoting expansion through exclusion, dominance by dispossession and, thus, an inherently repressive rather than transcendent patriarchal order. As such, the lust of Ballard’s unsung dreams underscore the structural link as proposed by Žižek, between forms of highly visible “subjective violence,” and a largely invisible but “pervasive systemic violence” intrinsic to the “normal, peaceful state of things” (1989 120).

What is more, Ballard's sexual violence is therefore consolidated within those "mythological concepts of the origins of violence" identified by René Girard as instrumentally integral to the "abstract space" of capitalist hegemony (Girard 6). That said being said, this 'abstract space,' where nature is replaced by cold abstraction, respectively denotes Henri Lefebvre's notion of the "mental space of castration," wherein "phallic solitude reigns," and the "image [...] supplants the [man himself]" (Lefebvre 309). John Grammer, therefore, considers McCarthy's specific critique of American masculinity, as characterised through Ballard as an "armed man, [...] prepared to defend [...] his own liberty and property," as being predicated on a fabled narrative of individual masculine pursuit, and repulsively imparted by way of Ballard's violent acts of necrophilious predation so as to explicitly expound that always impotent pursuit for resolution and regeneration (Grammer 39).

It is this traditional mythic narrative, of course, that then ultimately discards men like Ballard within a fatal environment of self-renewing expectations and self-validating imperatives - which "he guessed he [wanted]," for he'd "often heard men say as much" (CG 51). Having inherited these cultural constructions of masculinity, McCarthy does not, however, just recall the violence of primordial conflict, but seems rather intent upon reforming and demythologizing such traditions. His decision to write the study of a "child of god," rather than a formidable psycho, certainly compels the thoughtful reader to "wonder what stuff they [themselves] [are] made of" (133), and acknowledge their own murderous impulses so as to furthermore recognize the ways in which serial killers literalize those nationalistic imperialist ideals that have haunted American cultural history.

Child of God, thus, in many ways marks a pivotal moment in the evolution of McCarthy's oeuvre, for his horror-drenched and heavily allegorical aesthetic style, combined with a historically rooted commentary of social ills, subsequently set forth the symbolic foundation for his literary relocation in the early eighties; from East Tennessee to the mythically fertile desert Southwest. Lester Ballard, in other words, preludes the American cowboy archetype employed throughout McCarthy's later western fiction, and for which the author is most widely esteemed and celebrated. If we consider McCarthy's earlier text in this

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way, it becomes clear, then, that the intimation of this Southern parable is not simply to expose the monstrous heart of masculinity, but to instead, and much more damagingly, call attention to that national legacy of abject violence upon which the American nation was founded; and through which American men such as Lester Ballard, “[this] stained and drooling cretin,” turn out to be worth “more than you [...] might [...] think” (111).

Chapter Five

“They were killers. Of course they were; what would anyone expect them to be?”

Martial Camouflage, Containment, and Castration in Michael Herr’s *Dispatches*

“The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting.”

Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1979 130)

There has long been a critical consensus that the presiding mood of America in the late sixties and early seventies was one of pervasive social upheaval, with perpetual ‘crisis’ seeming in many ways the narrative rule. As previous chapters have shown, the literary fiction of this period reflects a significantly increased concern for such alterations in the values and attitudes of contemporary cultural life through representations of modern American masculinities. Multiple liberation struggles, including Civil Rights, Feminism, and sexual politics, converged with core economic shifts that transformed the US from an industrial based to a consumerist model. For hegemonic masculinity, this is a transferal from ‘masculine’ industrial labour and the physically expressive body to ‘feminine’ consumerism. Often fiction in this period, as we have seen, registers those changes through the lens of a fraying of what was once a fortified fabric from which white, patriarchal power was normatively fashioned. What is most disrupted by the paradigm shifts of the era appears, then, to be a monolithic, coherently bounded American masculinity. However, as my research shows, rather than being negated, the fabric of that dominant masculinity regenerated and reasserted itself, primarily through the fraught revival of a violent and mythologized hypermasculinity in mainstream US culture. Whether it is through the suburban maladjustment of Eliot Nailles and Paul Hammer, the fraudulent frontier ethic of Ed Gentry and Lewis Medlock, or the more perverse pugnacity of Lester Ballard and internalised racism of Cholly Breedlove, by the mid-seventies numerous American novelists had thus sought to artistically magnify the ways in which fundamental changes in the patterns of national life were occurring – changes which are represented more often than not

as damaging to the normative model of masculinity and the experiential consciousness of men.

There is, of course, no doubt that much of the leading literature of this post-war period - by both the authors featured in this study as well as those who are not primarily discussed, including Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, and John Updike to name only a few - creatively succeeded in translating an authentically raw, masculinist experience of contemporary American existence into a fictional work of social realism. Nevertheless, it is important to appreciate the extent to which the social ferment of the sixties and seventies had ultimately begun to impose very specific and unprecedented pressures on the novelist and, particularly, the novel form. This is important, John Hollowell argues, for the precise reason that writers of fiction in such a society “so fluid and so elusive” were, as it happens, finding it disconcertingly difficult to define “just what ‘social reality’ was” (5). Increasingly, everyday ‘reality’ seemed to “pre-empt the possibilities of the novelist’s imagination,” becoming “more fantastic” than the fictional visions of even the most renowned American writers (Hollowell 3). In his 1961 article, “Writing American Fiction,” Roth himself expressed the frustrations of the American author in the middle of the twentieth-century, whom he described as having “his hands full in trying to understand, then describe, and then make *credible* much of American reality” (224). According to Roth, the “actuality” of modern life perceptually “stupefies,” it “sickens [and] infuriates,” finally becoming “a kind of embarrassment to one’s own meagre imagination” by persistently “outdoing our talents” and “[tossing] up figures almost daily that are the envy of any novelist” (Roth 244).

Indeed, with events reported regularly by newspapers and magazines, of “a killer in a tower [shooting] randomly into a crowd and [slaughtering] a dozen people,” of a “young woman stabbed to death in full view of thirty-eight witnesses who did nothing” (Hollowell 3),²³ there was little to distinguish the factual realities of national life from the fantastical

²³ Here Hollowell is referring to the mass killings carried out by Charles Whitman, which took place on August 1st 1966, at the University of Texas, Austin; and to the murder of Catherine Susan Genovese, who was stabbed to death outside her apartment building in New York City on March 14th 1964.

unrealities outlined in the imaginary news of John Cheever's *Bullet Park*; in which, we as readers know, "a maniac with a carbine had massacred seventeen people in a park," and "a hairdresser [...] had shot his wife, his four children, his poodle and himself" (Cheever 64). What had once been fictional "news from another planet" (Cheever 64) was, thus, filtering beyond clear discretion into the everyday events of American cultural life and, as such, continually (con)fusing the formerly comfortable categories of reality and unreality; that is to say, Susan Jeffords asserts, the essential "status of fact and fiction" (30). It is arguably for this unique reason that writers such as Joan Didion, Norman Mailer, and Hunter Thompson, tellingly turned away from the creation of narrative fiction to confront the public issues of the time; focusing, instead, on the nonfictional forms of social commentary, documentary and, most notably, a special kind of 'New Journalism.'

First coined by reporter Tom Wolfe, this documentary approach known as 'New Journalism' combines the personal and ethical elements frequently found only in literary fiction with the detailed observations of journalism, with the purposeful intention to reconceive a form of nonfiction that may "read like a novel" (Wolfe 9). Whilst "reading like fiction," it is, nonetheless, crucially "not fiction," and rather a more "imaginative approach to reporting" which, Gay Talese argues, "seeks a larger truth than is possible through mere compilation of verifiable facts, the use of direct quotations, and adherence to the rigid organisational style of the older form" (vii). Until the early sixties, the typical news article had traditionally been the "symbol of the frightened charm-air-doile Vicks Vapo-Rub *Weltanschauung*," characterised by a deferential lack of value judgments and emotionally coloured adjectives, and likewise principally based upon a monolithic objectivity and impersonality on the part of the journalist (Wolfe xi). Certainly many twentieth-century Western news organisations have striven, first and foremost, for such 'objectivity,' but like Talese, Susan Carruthers contends that this should not be taken as synonymous with 'truthfulness.' For Carruthers, the very attempt to separate 'fact' from 'comment' essentially "mystifies" the "epistemological impossibility of pristine, value free facts," and obscures the "underlying assumptions and preferences" which news content will unavoidably contain,

irrespective of the ‘professionalism’ of the reporter in trying to avoid prejudice (17). That which Wolfe expressly deems “totem journalism,” therefore, requisitely reflects the authorised attitudes of those with vested interests in how the news is both described and disseminated (Wolfe xv). On the other hand, however, by openly revealing their confessional biases and using literary techniques to mediate information, writers of new journalism were in effect rebelling against the homogenised forms of experience imposed by the conventional standards of ‘objective reporting,’ and asserting a ‘new’ subjective formula so as to engage directly and innovatively with the radically altered reality of modern life.

The generation of this new kind of nonfiction in dominant US culture, to this end, signifies a key shift in the relationship of literary art to experience, and to the *collective* experiences of the many important mass events of the sixties and seventies. John Hellman describes how, in order to construct meaning in an era when perhaps more than at other times in American history public events were confusing, chaotic, and almost completely without sense, the new journalist “exploits the transformational resources of human perception and imagination” to seek out “a fresher and more complete experience of an event” (7). They then reconstruct that experience into a “personally shaped” ‘fiction’ that could communicate something approaching the “wholeness and resonance” it has had for them (Hellman 7). In a text such as *Dispatches* (1977) - a work of new journalism generally considered to be one of the best to come out of the Vietnam War experience - war correspondent Michael Herr accordingly affirms that “conventional journalism could do no more to reveal [the] war than conventional firepower could win it” (220). To convey the quality of his experience of the war and simultaneously seek to comprehend it, Herr consequently recreates Vietnam through “memory and art,” assembling the facts into an individually imagined aesthetic that will embody a signification “not available to the fictive forms already imposed upon the experiencing mind by one’s culture” (Hellman 132). Occupying an uneasy position between fact and fiction, Herr’s literary aim is, therefore, to “report meaningfully” about Vietnam - or, more specifically, “about death, which of course was really what it was all about” (*DP* 217) – and to “bring out [the] secret history” buried

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beneath the surface facts, because “for all the books and white papers, all the talk and the miles of film, something wasn’t answered, it wasn’t even asked” (*DP* 47).

In many ways the violent events of the 1960s and ‘70s in Southeast Asia provide an “appropriate arena” for new journalism explorations, regularly requiring “considerable skill and courage” by the participant observer, who partakes to depict the verisimilitude of soldierly experiences often “neglected or distorted by the traditional press” (Hollowell 42). Though straight journalism may have brought “innumerable *facts* about the war into American homes,” (Hellmann 127; emphasis added), the dubious precepts of ‘objectivity’ within which the media worked indicate that it would be “as impossible to know what Vietnam looked like from reading most newspaper stories as it would be to know how it smelled” (*DP* 94). Similarly, with the release of such militaristic macho films as *Uncommon Valor* (1983), *Missing in Action* (1984), and *Rambo: First Blood*, Parts I and II (1982-85), the retrospective consideration of US involvement in Vietnam during the political and historical revisionism of the early eighties showcased a not so sophisticated or subtle, but nevertheless culturally endorsed, American national denial of the actualities of the war; which, according to John Rambo, “somebody wouldn’t let us win” (*First Blood*). What is clear, then, is the extent to which much popular Vietnam representation – whether in the shape of films, novels, or newspaper reportage both in and after the first war that America had ever lost - was less interested in describing the pressing realities of those “poor, tired grunts” (*DP* 220), and rather emblematic of a general “restructuring and circulation of ideological production” in contemporary American culture (Jeffords 1). Of crucial significance here, when thinking about the war and its relevance within the genre of new journalism, is that the “framework” through which those processes of cultural formation are enacted “is that of gender” (Jeffords 1).

In the face of a societal drift when Americans were clearly seeking “some sense of cohesion,” Jonathan Mitchell claims that President John F. Kennedy was able to initially provide one such standard by rhetorically “reinvigorating well-established national myths” (112). Indeed, Kennedy looked to the nation’s psychological trauma, namely the “loss of the

frontier,” and assured them that it “still existed,” while “indirectly pointing young men to it as being in Vietnam” (Mitchell 112). Having grown up in a culture of Cold War conformity that experienced a distinct dissatisfaction with American masculinity, the frontier rhetoric of “ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country,”²⁴ naturally had an immense pull on the imagination of those boys coming of age in the 1960s; who very much still clung to reveries of heroic masculinity realisable through war. With the ascension to superpower status in WWII, Brenda Boyle asserts that the customary American ethos promulgated an audacious, aggressive, altruistic “experience in war” as the primary means through which “boys become men” (3). It is this conversion that also makes them “real Americans,” and hence the young men of the Vietnam cohort were convinced that “fighting in a war,” almost as if an ontological “rite of passage,” was something they should “aspire to do” (Boyle 3). A generation brought up on WWII movies and westerns, Truman Capote congruently explicates how these civilian teenagers could not help but get “swept up in the patriotic tide of the Kennedy era,” genuinely believing that the inaugural promise of a New Frontier in Vietnam meant they could be like John Wayne, “charging up some distant beach [...] in *Sands of Iwo Jima*, and then coming home a suntanned warrior with medals on [his] chest” (*A Rumor of War* 4, 6).

The celebration of martial character and purpose so integral to many WWII movies certainly played a major part in affecting a glorified connection between masculine validation and military engagement for the young fighting men of the Vietnam era. The associated Green Beret, “man with true grit,” John Wayne persona likewise offered a carefully contrived, unambiguous definition of American warrior-masculinity to those pursuing frontline heroism as a way to demonstrate manhood.²⁵ Ultimately born of the two most revered roles of the western individualist and the WWII marine - both of which, Katherine Kinney contends, “represent a nostalgic yearning for the innocence of the past at

²⁴ Quote from JFK’s 1961 inauguration address, which also serves as the epigraph to Ron Kovic’s Vietnam autobiography, *Born on the Fourth of July* (1976).

²⁵ Quotation from the 1969 film *True Grit*, for which Wayne won his only Oscar playing the role of U.S. Marshal “Rooster” Cogburn. Wayne is also celebrated for his performance as the “tough-as-nails” Colonel Mike Kirby in *The Green Berets* (1968).

critical moments of modernisation in American history” (18) – the mythic figure of John Wayne was the embodied symbol of American patriotism carried to Vietnam in the 1960s. This affiliation between an icon of popular culture like John Wayne and an historical event like the Vietnam War manifestly corroborated the nation’s “preferred self-image of itself” through a metanarrative of hegemonic masculinity (Hellman 92). It thus becomes apparent that this idea of a regenerative martial machismo – represented rhetorically in Kennedy and expounded across post-war American popular culture - was “not simply an aspect,” but rather the “primary project of regenerating American culture as whole” (Jeffords 135).

Michael Shapiro explains that, “part of every collective struggle over political self-definition involves attempts to maintain [...] particular imaginaries of the masculine,” thereby rendering the “martial male body” a constitutive “representation of state power” (145-6). By the same token, Mark Seltzer affirms that this “linking together anxieties about the natural body and the body of the nation” – linking together, that is, “body-building and nation building” – conceives of the individual as something that not only can be made, but moreover, “that the male natural body and national geography are surrogate terms” (Seltzer, 1992 149). The strategy for the “making of men” via the warring image of Wayne, in this sense, works to provide that which Seltzer respectively deemed an authoritative and authentic “antidote” to the “anxieties about the depletion of agency and virility” in a modern American machine culture (1992 149). Ironically, however, by making no ostensible distinction between the ‘real’ circumstances of war and the ‘make-believe’ chronicles of a movie hero, the literal equating of John Wayne with the Vietnam War - and, by extension, American society at large – forthrightly testifies to the mass produced iconic images and stories through which a society manufactures consensual conformity, and the analogous “crude fictionalising of the historical record” that later came to be known as “the ‘credibility gap’ in the Johnson administration” (Kinney 12).

Typically, an effective cultural mythos functions as a “subliminal reinforcement of national character and identity,” one which, Louis J. Kern argues, “provides a gloss” on a people’s historical experience, “simultaneously stretching backward and forward to link the

present with past and future” (38). It is possible to deduce, as such, the exact extent to which the widely persuasive invocation of masculine imaginaries on behalf of escalating the war in Vietnam originally obscured both the true nature of the conflict and the character of American participation in it. Richard Slotkin describes how, following Kennedy, President Lyndon B. Johnson cited the classic expression of the “captivity myth,” in which the American family – “symbolic embodiment of social order, centring on the figure of the mother and child and associated with the cultivation of the soil” – is assaulted by “dark and savage forces from beyond the borders, aided by local renegades” (Slotkin, 1973 562). Implicit in the myth is the “rescue of the captive by the hunter,” who, like Wayne wiping out the Indians, will fight the enemy on his own terms and in his own ruthless manner, with only a “devotion to the concept of opening the forest to higher cultivation saving him from becoming in the process a reflection or a double of his dark opponent” (Slotkin, 1973 563). President Johnson went on to emphasise that the war in Vietnam was undertaken “not for worldly gain,” but for the “rescue of the helpless,” and to offer a “super-TVA-type development of the Mekong delta as a vision of the regeneration that might follow peace on American terms” (Slotkin, 1973 563).

As one US major appropriately states in *Dispatches*, “We had to destroy Ben Tre in order to save it,” that was how “most of the country came back under what we [Americans] called control” (70). This mythopoeic rationality enabled men to somehow glory in the act of destruction itself, encouraging them to believe in their “manhood and godhood,” specifically their American power “to dominate life and to perpetuate and extend [themselves] and [their] power” (Slotkin, 1973 563). Unlike his predecessor, however, Johnson was unable to uphold this mythic frontier guise first propagated by Kennedy and valorised as the mode of progressive masculine expression and behaviour through the “poisonous illusion of John Wayne” (Kinney 13). In calling for Americans to work towards creating a ‘Great Society,’ and simultaneously waging a war of attrition which led to an increase in the need for the draft, Johnson dealt with the issues of the time as “military-political issues,” instead of rhetorically “elevating them to the level of frontier myth” (Mitchell 112). In doing so, he

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“lost his margin from regeneration through violence” (*DP* 57), and ensued to inadvertently expose the “lack in the big Other,” the “Real of the myth” (Mitchell 112), whilst furthermore imperilling the “ideological structure” Kaya Silverman credits to be at work “fortifying masculinity against any knowledge of the void upon which it rests” (1992 63).

As outlined in the introduction to this thesis, this “belief system” – or ideological ‘reality’ – is the ‘Dominant Fiction,’ upon which, Silverman argues, social structures rely for their sense of unity and identity (1992 8). We know that for this ideology to successfully govern the male subject’s belief - and, in turn, manufacture and maintain a normative masculinity - it must necessarily intercede at the most profound level of the latter’s constitution. In other words, with the attribution of ‘reality,’ it must “bring the subject into conformity with the symbolic order by fostering normative desires and associations,” and subsequently define the psychic ‘reality’ of the prototypical male (1992 50). Belief, as such, is granted not at the level of consciousness, but rather “at that of fantasy,” with the masculine ego situated from the very beginning in a “fictional direction,” and that which commands his belief, likewise, “profoundly phantasmagorical” (Silverman, 1992 20). Since everything that productively passes for ‘reality’ within a given social formation is articulated in relation to these conditions, they consequently represent that which Herr terms “mythic tracks,” including the most “aggravated soldier-poet fantasy” and the “lowest John Wayne wet dream,” which made every American in Vietnam “a true volunteer” (*DP* 19). It is thus important to emphasise that, if ideology is central to the “maintenance of classic masculinity,” the classic semiology of masculinity is equally essential to the “maintenance of America’s governing ‘reality’” (Silverman, 1992 15). That is to say, that our entire “world,” then, depends upon the “alignment of phallus,” masculine fantasy, “and penis,” male fact (Silverman, 1992 16).²⁶

²⁶ Together with the likes of Silverman and Jeffords, recent works by Susan Gubar (as quoted in my introduction) stress the centrality of the discourse of war to the consolidation of the penis/phallus equation.

Given that American leadership consistently defined the war in Vietnam in relation to a masculinised 'will' – in effect as a “symbolic war,” in which the “true terrain was the American character” and the “ultimate stakes world history” (Hellmann 4) - Louis Althusser insists that, in ideology, “the real relation is inevitably invested in the imaginary relation,” a relation that expresses this 'will' as a “hope or nostalgia,” rather than “describing a reality” (1990 20). This relationship is informed moreover by what Ernesto Laclau calls, “a will to totality,” performing as the “mechanism” by which a society tries to “institute itself as such on the basis of closure, of the fixation of meaning, of the non-recognition of the infinite play of differences” (24). By failing to maintain the deep-seated, symbolic-ideological intensity of a collective consciousness - which had traditionally allowed Americans to believe that, as a people, they are an exception to history - the incoherent realities of the Vietnam experience began to therefore unearth that which Ray Bourgeois Zimmerman usefully defines as “the inadequacy of the mythic master-narrative as a meaningful conceptualisation of the war,” as well as the lack of a “viable alternative model” of masculine heroism or national purpose (80). Indeed, despite Wayne's mythic “currency” as a nationally revered icon, the frenzied reality of the Marine Corps proved “inconsistent with the romanticised representations” routinely extended by the celluloid hero in his movies (Zimmerman 77). Thus, “unlike fathers coming home after WWII,” Terry Anderson further alleges how Vietnam Veterans “rarely talked of heroism, duty, [or] honour” (247). Instead, the “endless war became an endless barrage of horror stories and disillusionment” (Anderson 247), while one of the most unfailing refuges for besieged masculinity, the soldier-protector, was now coming to be publically perceived as a failed man; i.e. as “living proof of the incommensurability of penis and phallus” (Silverman, 1992 63).

Considering the meretricious power of this mythic view of American national identity and of the war in Vietnam, it is not surprising that these men fall first into a “measure of compliance with the narrative,” and then into a “cynical and fatalistic disillusionment” (Zimmerman 80). Judith Butler's conception of gender as performance is germane here, providing a means to analyse this disjuncture between desired male 'acts,' as

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typified by Wayne, and directly ‘lived experiences,’ as realised in Vietnam, as indicative of the “imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced” - namely, of the very ‘unnaturalness’ of masculinity’s patriarchal “claim on naturalness and originality” (Butler, 1988 125). In the jungles of Southeast Asia, the American fighting men could, as it were, only ever achieve an approximation of what they desired, as they were ultimately investing in a discourse of warfare predicated upon a masculine ‘reality’ which had been replaced by a pathologized counterfeit belonging on celluloid. This “immersion in the symbolic at the expense of the real,” as Sally Bachner terms it (73), is of course the common allegory underlying much New Journalistic work on Vietnam, wherein the archetypal warrior-representative of the culture embarks on “some heavy heart-of-darkness trip,” and, overloaded with “the input! The input!,” his quest soon dissolves into an utter chaos of dark revelation (*DP* 8). Along with Herr and Capote, non-fictional works by Ron Kovic and Norman Mailer sought to represent the war to this end; overturning the traditional Hollywood trope of joining the Marines “to be a hero” (Kovic 63) in favour of the “credibility of actual experience” patterned into a narrative by their subsequent “recollection and interpretation” of that experience (Hellmann 102).

Because, as noted above, “it developed in the context of one of the most violent decades in American life,” it is important to recognise the ways in which the revolt from tradition the ‘New Journalism’ denotes is explicitly a “product of that social turbulence” (Hollowell 46). Integral to this contention, however, is this notion that the ‘tradition’ from which new journalism was rebelling is buttressed in a mythology of patriarchal masculinity, thus making it a valuable form through which to consider issues surrounding contemporary American manhood. Volunteering to cover the war in Vietnam as a free-lance journalist for *Esquire* magazine, Herr notably states that, “a lot of things had to be unlearned before you could learn anything at all” (*DP* 210). In choosing not to stipulate exactly what must be “unlearned,” Herr skilfully blurs the “incredible demands put on [journalists] from offices thousands of miles away” together with normative constructions of militaristic masculinity, and suggests that practices of “objectivity and fairness” are “ultimately reverential towards

the institutions involved,” whether it is “the Office of the President, the Military, America at war,” or “the empty technology that characterised Vietnam” (*DP* 216-17). In other words, when in service to reporting on, or fighting in the war, journalists and soldiers alike will automatically mimic the “dominant understandings and values” of the broader structures in which they are embedded, while simultaneously professing the “ideological innocence” of those organisations through which their convictions are compliantly “manufactured” (Carruthers 18). In short, Herr is indirectly alluding to the dominant fiction at work fortifying American masculinity so as to point, respectively, to the ‘interpretive’ possibilities underlying culturally endorsed ‘facts’; which are here, in 1970s Vietnam, largely overcast by the Hollywood encodements of a nostalgic virile valour as falsely encapsulated by John Wayne. Whatever claims of truth have been made about American men and the war in Vietnam are, therefore, surmised to be decidedly “contextual” rather than “absolute,” and as residing within the “frame of fiction even when appealing to historical sources of evidence” - such is the “reality-conferring power of fiction” that is the legacy of the war (Kinney 10).

To avoid merely reproducing those customary societal techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth, the literary aim of *Dispatches* hence becomes that of exposing the “protected space” (14) preserving America’s determining mythologies and offering a new “remote but accessible space,” one in which there are “no ideas,” “no facts,” but “only clean information,” and through which the author may be free to then “learn” about the ‘actual’ experience of men and war in the modern era (29). Herr knows that “the uses of most information were flexible” (3), so if he is to capture this ‘reality’ he must go beyond reporting and work towards expressing “how tired” these American soldiers were, and “how sick of it, how moved they’d been and how afraid” (29). Specifically, he wants to find a means to convey the soldier’s experience of the war “from the intimate inside out” (39), which is what we as readers “seek in reading about war,” but are “by definition barred from if we are not veterans” (Kinney 112). To do this effectively, Herr thus purposely avoids recourse to the supposedly ‘objective’ “proper language” supplied by American culture (*DP* 29), which is ever ready to “tame the experience of war” by transmitting it in the externally

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“familiar formulas” of frontier heroism (Hellmann 130); around which, of course, the nation’s ‘reality’ coheres while the origins of American intervention are long since forgotten. In its place, he aspires to record with unparalleled insight and intensity the scenes and dialogue of events more or less as they occur; to report soldiers’ stories that were “so fresh” the teller was still “in shock” (*DP* 29); to immerse himself amongst the soldiers, and “saturate” himself in this kind of dogged “close-to-the-skin” (Wolfe 51) ‘new’ journalistic reporting until he “knew what they knew,” and what those men knew “was really something” (*DP* 220).

With this in mind, it is necessary to clarify that Herr is also very much aware, “you didn’t always know what you were seeing until later, maybe years later, that a lot of it never made it in at all” (20). It is precisely this retrospective “gap” – as opposed to a prospective gap - between “experience and representation,” which carries the “mark of authenticity” (Kinney 112). Indeed, one of the most notable features of *Dispatches* is the way certain narrative elements can literarily “come back and haunt you,” taking the reader indiscriminately back and forth through time in what Herr himself calls “illumination rounds” (3, 167). Nancy Anisfield describes how Herr’s narrative “cataloguing of events,” which seem to give a reflective overview of the war experience, is frequently set against the “heightened realism of minute details and focused descriptions” (56). For Anisfield, these fragmentary shifts in time and mood create a “fictional environment” that is not only better qualified to express the “physical and psychic atmosphere of the war,” but which also gives the writer “more dimensions through which to comment on the war” than fact alone (59). Portions of the book were, of course, originally published in *New American Review* no. 7, *Esquire*, and *Rolling Stone*, yet those pieces were not compiled for publication in *Dispatches* till nearly a full decade after some of them had first appeared, between 1967 and 1969. The decision to rework his articles into a book “years later,” and with the ‘illuminating’ benefit of hindsight, thereby implies that, while the stories that comprise the book may be “totally true,” Herr is no longer concerned with ‘facts’ except inasmuch as they are retrospectively

imbued with a larger political significance relating to contemporary American masculinity (*DP* 27).

In his discussion of *Why Are We in Vietnam?* (1967), Richard Pearce notably credits Mailer's ability to give "full recognition to the [fact] frontier values [...] derived from a past that *never was*" (Pearce 410; emphasis added). This is useful when considering *Dispatches* since Herr, too, is charting a vigorously masculinised history that, one might say, "*wasn't real anymore*" (3). That is, he creates a traumatised "landscape of consciousness" within which, Philip Beidler contends, "experiential memory persistently undergoes imaginative assimilation into newer and more complex patterns of achieved meaning" (16, 146). Herr's text, in other words, represents "an old story with the hair still growing on it" (*DP* 28), and one is repeatedly struck by how the narrative form "demands attention to its own sense of ever-enlarging context" (Beidler 146); how "any single observation or datum" will eventually be seen to have "pointed at once backward and forward to any number of others bearing it some complex relation" (146). The kind of "imaginative cartography" practiced here, needless to say, must be born in "equal measure of experiential memory and aesthetic invention," for only in this "matrix of vision" will the 'information' Herr adduces as constituting for him the experience of Vietnam achieve a "power to signify in some larger sense of coherent relationship as well" (Beidler 142); one that may finally "forge the link between personal witness and larger visions of history and culture" (142); a relationship, that is, which is no longer invariably invested in a series of patriarchal prerogatives.

Yet, while they may testify to the "subversion of traditional orders of meaning," the stories both Herr and Mailer tell are "not necessarily subversive" (Kinney 5). Much recent writing of Vietnam is rather more a classic case of 'experience' finding its own "characteristic method of literary representation" within the larger context of "myth making as a whole" (Beidler 140). What 'facts' can still be found beyond the "unattainable" frontier fables "masked" in martial heroism (Pearce 410), that is, are being "made to mean," as they had never done by themselves, "through the shaping, and ultimately the transforming power of art" (Beidler 16). For Mailer, this involves exercising the "instincts of the novelist" (*The* 208

Armies of the Night 284), while Herr capitalises on the “exact mood” only a “correspondent could give you” (*DP* 227). Arguably, the most telling facet of Herr’s text, as with other works emerging as part of the new journalistic literature on the war, is therefore the collective impression it gives of an almost uncanny centrality of sense-making perspective; for as Herr exclaims, “it was late ’67 now,” and even the “most detailed” facts “didn’t reveal much anymore” (*DP* 3). The fact that “trying to read them was like trying to read faces of the Vietnamese, and that was like trying to read the wind” (3), to this end, denotes the difficulty assigning significance to immediate and transient experience - which “happened in seconds,” but which, Herr concludes, can only truly be interpreted “over years,” as “time outside of time” via the meaningful medium of memory (253).

As might be expected, new journalism is a mode often not subject, conclusively, to classification in terms of ‘fact’ or ‘fiction.’ Rather, it is designed to “encompass both” within this “new range of sense-making perspective” (Beidler 139). Herr’s statement that to try to “read the [...] Vietnamese” was but to try to “read the wind,” markedly reinforces this “(con)fusion of the status of fact and fiction” by further suggesting that Vietnam is an “unfamiliar world” in which “expected definitions and conclusions,” explicitly relating to American manhood, “would appear alien” (Jeffords 30). It is pertinent here to refer to Jeffords once again, for not only is her study on gender and the Vietnam War one of the few contemporary works to discuss *Dispatches* directly, but she furthermore provides a particular textual analysis that convincingly positions Herr’s representation of the war with reference to a contemporaneous ‘remasculinization’ of American manhood at work in the culture at large. The rest of this chapter consequently will offer a close reading of Michael Herr’s *Dispatches*; specifically with regards to how its distinct ‘new’ literary form may serve, in various ways, to confront traditional orders of masculine meaning, and take a first step towards potentially disrupting those intimate structures that instil war and gender as rich sites of truth-making processes in modern American society. Following Jeffords, we know it is “the crystallised formations of masculinity in warfare” that enable gender relations in society to “survive,” offering venerated territory in which to “adjust, test, and reformulate

general social relations” (Jeffords xv). Thus, by taking an assertive look beyond the “calculated euphemisms and statistical mirages” employed by US officials (Hellman 129) - who could routinely “talk the kind of mythical war you wanted to hear described” (*DP* 227) - and turning one’s eye toward the candid “death, blindness, loss of legs, arms or balls” - namely, the experiential corporeality of the “whole rotten deal” that was Vietnam (*DP* 14) - Herr’s text exposes a deep gulf; a quite literal visceral void manifest as a “bloody raw [...] wound” (*DP* 170), between “the consciousness” of Americans and “the actuality” of the war that, from the beginning, produced “an artificial fictive *reality*” conditioning the character and course of the experience of American men in and at war (Hellman 129).

Through reviewing some of the major strategies by which Herr understands this conditioning to take place - including “the shift from ends to means, the proliferation of techniques and technologies, the valorisation of performance, the production and technologization of the male body as an aesthetic of spectacle, and the blurring of fact and fiction” (Jeffords 1) - this chapter then aims to address that which American soldiers and correspondents initially “didn’t know,” for it “took the war to teach it” (*DP* 20); that is to say, that the war in Vietnam was being fought for reasons that “had more to do with the US than with Vietnam” itself (Bachner 82). Indeed, the perceived breakdown of American world hegemony in Vietnam occurred in tandem with the domestic upheavals that attacked the categories by which American authority was both traditionally defined and upheld. The “violent solipsism” of Vietnam War narratives in the post-1975 period thus recurrently reflects a very “material struggle to redefine American identity” in a world of lost ideals (Kinney 5). Films like *The Deer Hunter* (1978) and *Apocalypse Now* (1979) famously are structured around the lone hero’s confrontations with the “ambiguities and contradictions” at the heart of the nation’s mythologised masculine self-conception (Kern 40), while the South East Asian jungle simply provides an exotic surrogate setting for Americans to carry a “stupid gun [...] around like John Wayne,” and to “play [their] fucking games” (*TDH*).

It is, of course, this “compulsive need” to return “again and again to the cultural trauma of the Vietnam War” (Kinney 7) that respectively situates many of the problems

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encountered in Vietnam within bureaucratic and institutional structures, and in America's own principles, practices, and postures towards the war, rather than in the "very ugly events" of the war itself; which were, "again and again, not quite what you had expected" (DP 231). Certainly in *Dispatches*, 'the Nam' symbolises yet another site of the "Inscrutable Immutable" (DP 54). That is, that which Americans cannot intrinsically understand, but against which American soldiers are extrinsically oriented to observe a conspicuously gendered regeneration of a capitalistic, imperialistic mythologised national fiction. As Joan Didion makes clear in her ironically entitled *Democracy* (1984), however, "when it is read through the personal lives of people involved with that place," it becomes impossible to "subsume" the experience of Vietnam "into such a national allegory" (170).

To authenticate his representation of the war - and moreover, reveal the "facts" of American history as a "function" of a dubious "narrative assumption" (Didion 221) - Herr therefore stylistically fragments the spectacle of Vietnam into a collectivised account, using the authority of tangible experience as presented in the veteran's "blood and bone fragment" (DP 61), rather than through the transmission of any generalised knowledge a veteran might have "taken for fact in the world" but which is "no longer applicable [...] in the Nam" (Jeffords 31). Notably, however, once the absoluteness of this material is "out" - quite literally "[hanging] with loose flesh" - Herr is nevertheless mindful of the fact, "it won't go back in," subsequently transforming "levels of information" into "levels of dread" (DP 62). At principal stake in *Dispatches* is, thus, the very serious contemporary problem of not being able, or willing, to detach the power of truth from the previously formulated hegemonic, social, economic, and gendered structures supplied by one's culture, thereby reducing any demystification of martial masculinity to a traumatised, stressful, disordered truth known only to veterans; which is "an old story, unless of course you've never heard it" (DP 20).

From the outset, one of the most prominent and persistent motifs of *Dispatches* is the conflation of the soldier's experience of the war with "something he'd picked up from a movie or a television series" (152). This is a useful place to develop our reading of masculinity in Herr's text, for to be conscious of television and movies as the frame for the

Vietnam experience, is to be primed to the dimension of war as masculine performance. Herr significantly states at length:

You don't know what a media freak is until you've seen the way a few of those grunts would run around during a fight when they knew that there was a television crew nearby; they were actually making war movies in their heads, doing little guts-and-glory Leatherneck tap dances under fire, getting their pimples shot off for the networks. [...] Most combat troops stopped thinking of the war as an adventure after their first few firefights, but there were always the ones who couldn't let that go, these few who were up there doing numbers for the cameras (220).

The point of this buoyant Natty Bumppo exhibition is, of course, to "see if [they] can get you a story" by "[cranking] up [the] whole brigade" (140, 8), which may in turn establish their "own celebrity there," in Vietnam, transforming each individual Marine into some "outrageously glamorous figure" like "John Wayne or William Bendix" (198-99).²⁷ Considering what some of them are willing do "for a little ink" (8), these men are clearly "insane," but what Herr is essentially drawing attention to in these narrative moments is the fact, "the war hadn't done that to them" (213). Michael Bibby argues suggestively that, having been "wiped out by seventeen years of war movies before coming to Vietnam to get wiped out for good" (*DP* 213), Herr, instead, wishes to focus on the over-coded and objectified "potency of simulacra to construct subjectivities and to present history" (Bibby 104).

Herr's summation that, "we'd all seen too many movies" (*DP* 213), openly acknowledges the extent to which "the mass production and dissemination" of cinematic simulations fundamentally "intervene in [male] subjectivities" (Bibby 103); respectively

²⁷ Natty Bumppo (also known as "Leatherstocking") is the heroic protagonist of *The Leatherstocking Tales*, a series of five novels written by James Fenimore Cooper between 1827 and 1841. While the term "leatherneck" is commonly used as an informal term for a US marine, Herr's allusion to 'leather' similarly harks back to the unique 'leather stockings' worn by traditional American frontiersmen and made famous by Cooper's mythic tales; in which the individual American male would take forth progress whilst simultaneously bringing back natural virtue. Significantly, Cooper's stories were also made into a TV mini series in 1969, and again in 1984.

supplying “those grunts” with information and modes of masculine expression and behaviour that emanate not from immediately lived experience, but from prior screen images of “Steve McQueen working through a hard-revenge scenario” (DP 57-8). Within the context of war, that is, the “Command bravado” of action films merge with the techniques for interpreting actual experience, thereby breaking down the boundaries between the ‘real’ and the ‘imaginary,’ to the point that “they talked as though killing a man was nothing more than depriving him of his vigour” (145, 40). Fancying that they had come to Vietnam only to “play cowboys and Indians,” this obsession with the western genre of American cinema exemplifies the solipsism of US narratives of the Vietnam War, specifically, the “self-referential quality” that displaces the historical struggles within Vietnam with “a spectacle of American culture at war with itself” (Kinney 12). For Herr, “when you come from [such] places where they go around with war in their heads all the time,” it is inevitable that “certain connections” become “hard to make” (DP 20). Even after “you knew better” - i.e. are privy to the fact these “wasting movie-star” images are but the culturally fabricated, “false love object in the heart of the command” (256, 107) - he stresses how, “you couldn’t avoid the ways in which things got mixed,” most markedly, “the war itself with those parts of the war that were just like the movies” (213). Certainly “years of media glut had made certain connections difficult,” and hence the Marines - and “a lot of correspondents weren’t much better” (213) - succeed to recognise and reproduce their “movie-fed war fantasies” all the same, as a “pure, naked perception of reality” (DP 198; Althusser 1990, 26).

When “fantasy” is in some ultimate sense a “reality” for the male subject, this is because it articulates “a particular libidinal scenario or tableau,” namely, the “*mise-en-scène*” of one’s desire (Silverman, 1992 19). It is, then, no coincidence that the specular structure of cinematic experience works so well to represent war. Michael Clark explains how, just like a film, war is a “moral reserve,” that is a “*hole* in the social cloth” for which “no ordinary discourse is readily available,” and in which the “slightly more crazy” and/or inhumanely extreme behaviours normally restricted by society are “permitted, and even encouraged” (Clark 21). For Herr’s soldiers, the translation of military action into terms of

“what you look like” performing those actions (*DP* 256), certainly “limits their horrific consequences” by effectively “domesticating the violence” (Clark 22). Thus, “every time there was combat,” these men had “a license to go maniac” (55), since in war, soldiers are “making faces and moves [they’d] never make again” (22) - gestures that civilians only watch on the movie screen “back home,” in the ‘real’ world (59). This reflexive rectification of “all the terrible, heartbreaking” (236) scenes of the war in Vietnam, into a desensitised filmic fantasy, is typified through Herr’s “nonchalant” description of the “first few times [he] got fired at or saw combat deaths” (213), which he claims were “not real then,” and so “taught me nothing” (170). Herr give details of how:

“[Nothing] really happened [...]. It was the same *familiar* violence, only moved over to another *medium*; some kind of jungle play with giant helicopters and fantastic special effects, actors lying out there in canvas body bags waiting for the scene to end so they could get up and walk it off. But that was some scene (you found out), there was no cutting it” (213; emphasis added).

The politics of this process is particularly interesting, for in amassing the *familiar* filmic images that are already “locked in [his] head,” and furthermore projecting them onto this strange and threatening scene, Herr fundamentally implicates the nation’s archetypal sense of manhood in an imagined relation to the real (213). With Saigon looking more each day “like the final reel of *On the Beach*” (69), the specular media image actually precedes reality for the American soldier, who performs simply in correspondence to that cinematic vision as if by some late-capitalist consumer obligation - which, without you even realising, “just swallowed you up” (257).

This discrepancy between the visceral experience of war and the mental metaphorical scenes in which “it’s not real, it’s just some *thing* they’re going through that isn’t real” (*DP* 170), of course, could only exist in what Guy Debord has described as a world where “everything that was directly lived has moved away into representation,” and

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reality has reached “its absolute fulfilment in the spectacle” (36). That is to say, “where the tangible world is replaced by a selection of images, which exist about it and which simultaneously impose themselves as tangible” (Debord 36). What Herr’s Vietnam representation reveals most insistently, then, is the extent to which the American soldier is not only a “spectator” to this “part game, part show” (170), but is inevitably implicated in the construction of that representation; becoming an actor in what is, essentially, “more like a spectacle than a military operation (*DP* 155). Althusser suggests that this transaction induces in the subject a sensation whose verbal translation would be, “*Yes, it really is me!*” (1971, 171), subsequently underscoring how the reality of the male subject and his situation in a real world apart from the viewer’s gaze begins to fade into that of simulation, as he comes to recognise himself only through and as spectacle. Noticeably in Stanley Kubrick’s *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) - for which Herr wrote the screenplay - Private Joker similarly states, “*Is that you, John Wayne? Is this me?*” (*FMJ*). It is through this passive play (“*Is this me?*”) on Althusser’s confident contention (“*Yes, it really is!*”) that Herr emphasises the tentative staging of the male subject relative to Wayne’s spectacularised and phallic leather hide; a male “imitation of power” first identified in *Dispatches*, as being structurally severed from other forms of representation - namely, other forms of self - as well as to external reality prior to the realisation they really “*hate this movie*” (152, 192).

Rather than inspiring an imaginative independence to remake the war in the image of their own fictions, the disengagement from immediate experience outlined in *Dispatches* leads to a sense of the soldiers still being passive observers to the enhanced spectacle of Vietnam, regardless of their physical participation in the construction of that spectacle. This is precisely because, within the American military venue, each individual draftee is “*performing a masculinity*” that is “*expected by the American national symbolic*” (Boyle 9); which could not care “less about what *he* wanted” (*DP* 16). These men, in other words, are dutifully observing a series of manufactured beliefs, practices, and attributes accredited to the form of assertive masculinity suitable for participation in an American war venue, and likewise “impersonating [this] identity, [...] locking into [the] role,” in ironic compliance to

the wider cultural circumstances of the national symbolic (20). Herr markedly introduces the American Marine – “his face painted up for the night [...] like a bad hallucination” - in line with “the painted faces [he’d] seen in San Francisco a few weeks before,” only as “the other extreme of the same theatre” (7). In so doing, he recognises the production of forms of soldierly cohesion as “pure affectation” (215), operationally performed by men in front of other men as part of a process that was “so routine” (202), “you’re just behaving,” and don’t even “really know what you’re doing most of the time” (20). This performance primarily depends, of course, on the way it “made you feel like you were being watched” (24) - that is to say, on a soldier’s sense of being monitored – which subliminally induces service members to self-neutralise or police themselves into conforming with the military norms of “the Marine way” (106). All the while still imagining that this is “some kind of choice” they have freely made, the effect of this process is to institute a form of disciplinary control, the politics of which parallels the free-market ideology of late capitalism (16).

Given that “it was the only way [they] knew to behave there,” Herr proceeds to note how, “[entire] divisions would function in a bad dream state, acting out a weird set of moves without any connection to their source” (*DP* 160, 52). Significantly, Butler argues that, “what we take to be an internal essence of gender” is culturally contrived through such a “sustained set of acts” (1988 xv). She furthermore argues that gender as performance is rarely about consciously *choosing* gender, which is but a “fiction of the ego as master of circumstances” (Butler, 1988 124). Instead, “what we take to be real” (xxiii) is discursively produced on and through subjects – as “information printed on the eye, stored in the brain, coded over skin and transmitted by blood (*DP* 254) - so as to naturalise, both externally and physically, what is in fact “a changeable and revisable reality” (Butler, 1988 xxiii). To this end, Herr is underlining the “shitty choices” offered to Marines, (*DP* 16), who know they “have this *duty* to, you know, I don’t fucking know, whatever...” (27; emphasis added). Indeed, it is through statements like this that Herr purports the “priceless option” of *choice* to be no option at all, but rather “property of the press corps” (*DP* 227), and addresses the soldiers’ institutionally manipulated inability to truly make sense of “what [they] were doing

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over there” (227), or why, exactly, “*they* had to be here” (194); which was just simply “understood” as masculine truth and treaty; “but why was it understood?” (79). The political ramifications of this rhetorical question are important, for Herr begins to recognise the individual interests of the American male as existing in tension with those of the society as a whole. Rather than confronting mass society at large, however, Herr explains that the individual marine “professed to know and love war” nonetheless (175). This interchange is of course indicative of society’s ideological endeavour to have the American man seek the “source” of his “total dread” and dissatisfaction within himself (207), and in his ineffectiveness to cohere with the “refracted logic” of American masculine mythology, which in this case necessarily told you, “war is *good* for you” (104, 248)

In place of an utterly individualistic, “isolatos and out-riders” masculine agency (*DP* 34), we consequently find in the American soldier that which Aaron Belkin identifies as “a greater penchant for obedience, conformity, and docility” (12); specifically, a militaristic normativity paradoxically marked by toughness and strength on the one hand, while simultaneously yielding to the military chain of command on the other. What Herr’s grunts once trusted to be a “classic essential American” maleness innately “programmed in their genes” (*DP* 34), emerges, then, as nothing more than a rigidly hierarchical “stylisation of the [male] body” (Butler, 1988 xv). Here it is propitious to invoke the work of Hal Foster, according to whom the cultural fantasy of a violent, muscle-bound masculinity provides a kind of “defensive armouring” that seeks to repress “the point where the masculine subject confronts its greatest fear: its own fragmentation, disintegration, and dissolution” (Foster 79, 94). This figure of the classically armoured male body – which, Foster argues, “pervades the imaginary of American commercial culture” (69) - not only wills soldier-subjects as vehicles for “carrying a gun,” but also modifies militarised male bodies into weapons themselves, “with Cinemascope eyes and jaws stuck out like they could shoot bullets” (*DP* 17, 12).²⁸

²⁸ When training the recruits in *Full Metal Jacket*, Gunnery Sergeant Hartman affirms: “The deadliest weapon in the world is the marine and his rifle. It is your killer instinct which must be hardened if you expect to survive in combat. Your rifle is only a tool. It is the hard heart that kills.” He also declares in the same statement: “Marines are not allowed to die without permission.”

Herr recognises this reified instrumentality as a way of compensating for the deficit between the unmasculine subservience the military induces marines to enact and the self-assured masculine ideal with which they are supposed to identify; often describing how it “absorbed them, inhabited them, made them strong” - how it “brutalised them and darkened them,” and “very often made them [...] killers” (104). The fact “they were killers” - men who are, in effect, “BORN TO KILL” - is however immaterial in terms of a requisite recuperation of male agency through hyper-masculine violence (104, 73). This is made clear by the way Herr undermines this bold statement with the passive remark: “of course they were; what would anyone expect them to be?” (104). The desensitised expectancy conveyed here, in Herr’s connotative anti-essentialist and autotomized language, is demonstrative of the marine’s “programmed” and orchestrated corporeality (*DP* 34), and the concomitant vicissitudes of agency involved in the pervasive pairing of bodies and machines.

In keeping with Foster, Klaus Theweleit therefore maintains that, while the masculine body does “acquire boundaries,” they are always drawn “from the outside,” by the “disciplinary agencies of imperialist society” (418). Infused with the “intensity of a masculine ideal” with which all troops are paradoxically “ordered to comply,” the goal of martial training is, then, to oblige recruits into willingly surrendering to something external to the self, whilst furthermore transforming them into “a blind instrument to enforce another’s aims and purposes” (Belkin 41). The military service is designed in this way to produce compliance by sustaining mass “erasures of self” - that is, standardised states of mind that echo a psychological condition known as “identity diffusion” (39) - which in turn coordinates military masculinity as a site where imperial contradictions associated with the global deployment of American military forces can be “smoothed over,” almost as if “there were no contradictions at all” (Belkin 24). Predicated upon the illusion of coherence and control, the “historical armouring of the body” thus entails a “psychic deforming of the subject” (Foster 77) – more or less “like a misfire in the nervous system” (*DP* 26) - and Herr creatively confronts this psychic apprehension of the body as armour through his descriptive

displacement of the individual male body with the “nondescript face” of the collective organisation (DP 88).

The notion that service members’ bodies are “*things than can be made*” is considered throughout *Dispatches*, most markedly in the way Herr depicts each individual marine as a model of “uniform, and uniformed, mass production” (Seltzer 152-3). Herr describes how one combatant had once written on the back of his flak jacket, “*Yea, though I walk through the Valley of Shadow of Death I shall fear no Evil, because I’m the meanest motherfucker in the Valley,*” but had tried later, without much success, “to scrub it off” because “every damn dude in the DMZ had that written on their flak jackets” (88). Such a striking episode implies in the first instance the extent to which militias commonly relied on extraneous embellishments or shared signifiers to enhance their own mean ‘*motherfucker*’ masculine authority. Whether it was “the names of old operations,” or else their generic “war names” written on helmets and flak jackets, martial talismans ostensibly enabled soldiers serving in Vietnam to legitimise their sense of their own personal significance through associating themselves with the military and/or with certified military ideas (115). With less and less to “distinguish them from all other Americans” in Vietnam, however, Herr explains that, “you’d see them at the tables there, smiling their hard, empty smiles,” and “after a while they all looked alike” (172). This “diffuse and faceless” (DP 224) quality is visually elucidated during the opening credits of *Full Metal Jacket*, in which a chain of anonymous male recruits are having their heads shaved, one after another, to a backdrop of Johnny Wright’s “Hello Vietnam.” This standardised system of regulation and replication involved in the military making of men mimics the extreme bureaucratisation and over-organisation of life at the core of American commodity culture. Gradually “overlapping until they became indistinguishable,” Herr thus undermines the notion of a unique American maleness inherently known by each man “to be his” (DP 191); interpreting the role of the American soldier, instead, as nothing but an effective organisation man, and his uniform but a white-collar, grey flannel suit, custom tailored for mass response in a conformist society (225).

What then looks like, from one point of view, the commanding return to a natural state of warrior manhood, looks, from another, something like the opposite, an abstract and impersonal mass turn against nature; whereby all you could do was “file” each individual marine “in with the rest” (*DP* 61). Certainly for Herr, the imperative of keeping things and bodies in directed *motion* ironically entails the organised dissolving of combatants into artefacts so characteristically contained and “*motionless*,” it was “incredible [they] could still be alive” (205; emphasis added). The “mad, sustained” bodily movements that shape men into empty components of the war machine, and which overall make up systematic military management, furthermore pertain to the uncertain relation between surface reflection and interior states (139). As Seltzer explains, if the “inside story and the outside story” seem “interchangeable,” this is precisely because “it’s the boundaries between inside and outside that are violently being renegotiated, transgressed, and reaffirmed” (162). The “becoming-artifactual of persons” Herr describes, is, in this sense, equally compatible with the substitution of the “regimental and regimented body for the natural body” – that is to say, of the “invulnerable and artificial skin of the uniform-armour” for the “vulnerable and torn natural body” (Seltzer 163). Inasmuch as “the marine core wants to build indestructible men” - namely, “men without fear” (*FMJ*) - Herr therefore illuminates the brutal scenes of battle so as to make soldiers’ interior states visible, and to conversely expose the material reality of ‘fear’ by tearing open these “men who were very scared,” and forcing us to “survey the wreckage” (*DP* 211, 248). Often “quite literally turned inside out” (152), the male body becomes, as such, not a source of masculine power, but that which Sally Robinson deems a “text,” on which is written the “emotional, physical, and social traumas of contemporary masculinity” (169). It is by way of the topography of the wounded male body that Herr’s literal and literary experience of Vietnam is then embodied and, thus, made ‘real.’

Concerned with the bodily traumas of American soldiers fighting in Vietnam, the excess of “wounded male bodies” in Herr’s text serves to divert attention away from “male bodies as phallic weapons” (Robinson 107). Herr describes how “you could be shot, mined, grenaded, rocketed, mortared, sniped at, blown up and away so that your leavings had to be

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dropped into a sagging poncho and carried to Graves Registration” (*DP* 134). You could likewise “fly apart so that your pieces would never be gathered” - an ambivalently fragmentary image directly counter to the wholly firm and erect form of the classically armoured male body (133). What is figured to be most fearful about this complete bodily violation, however, is the extent to which it involves a symbolic, as well as literal castration, which effectively undermines the traditionally impermeable hegemonic power of patriarchy. Whereas “some feared head wounds or stomach wounds,” Herr explains that:

[Everyone] feared the wound of wounds, the Wound. Guys would pray and pray [...], offer anything, if only they could be spared that: Take my legs, take my heads, take my eyes, take my fucking life, You Bastard, but please, please, please, don’t take *those* (133).

There is a strangely unspoken quality withheld in this statement, as Herr refuses to explicitly divulge the castrating nature of the injury; deliberately denoting, instead, an ambivalent ‘Wound’ to ‘*those*’ that are unspecified. He continues:

Whenever a shell landed in a group, everyone forgot the next rounds and skipped back to top their pants away, to check, laughing hysterically with relief even though their legs might have been shattered, their kneecaps torn away (133).

Given that they are more partial to “getting killed” (231) than “hit in the balls” (36), what is really at issue here is the male subject’s “traumatic encounter with lack,” to which the female body is subsumed, and which thereby frequently registers as the “impairment of his anatomical masculinity” (Silverman, 1992 62). Because as noted above, her theorising links ideology and male subjectivity in a contingent binary, Silverman argues that physical injuries to representative male bodies - accompanied by a disintegrating belief in the inviolability of man - threaten to rupture and impede “*those*” unspoken dominant fictions safeguarding the maintenance of the national body via the consolidation of penis and phallus.

In other words, the assumption that “the penis is (or even represents) the phallus” is disabled here by the recognition of the penis as a “corporeal, and thus vulnerable, organ” (Robinson 43). Indeed, given that the male body is figured in the modern cultural imagination as permanently closed and discrete, Herr’s rendering of American marines as “dirt and blood and torn figures” functions to disrupt this somatic convention by making the male body as incontinent as any female body as figured in the male imagination (*DP* 21).

Herr describes how one marine, “making himself look at the incredible thing that had just happened to his leg,” would look “away and then back again, looking at it for a few seconds longer each time” until “he passed out” after “vomiting some evil pink substance” (30-1). Intimately acquainted with his innards as he is visually littered with gaping armour chinks, the military male body is presented by Herr as permeable in a manner that is rarely culturally afforded to men. With “his mouth [...] sprung open” and a “streak of red” running “all across his waist and down his legs,” Herr actually accentuates the “bloody raw” openings and orifices of the male body instead of its masculine closures and finishes (19, 170). Unlike in previous great American war books such as Ernest Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) or Stephen Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), Herr does not therefore regard “the wounded soldiers in an envious way,” nor conceive “persons with torn bodies to be peculiarly happy” (Crane 62). Whereas “Hemingway once described the glimpse he’d had of his soul after being wounded,” which “looked like a fine white handkerchief drawing out of his body,” Herr describes what “floated out” of these men to be “more like a huge grey ‘chute” (*DP* 262). The “wound” is never a “red badge of courage” for Herr (Crane 62), standing to mark masculine glory and honour, but rather this “grey-blue fishbelly promise of death that would spread upward,” as a bloody manifestation of the “destruction and decay” involved in the male desire to be John Wayne (*DP* 80, 208). The politics of this decision, to emphasise non-traditional masculine bodies in the hyper-masculinised setting of war, is, as such, evidence of Herr’s efforts to point out the disparities in monolithic codes of phallic masculinity. The breakdown of the male body in *Dispatches*

can be read, then, as a symbol of the age, and the failures of a certain kind of masculine ideology during and after the Vietnam War.

It is, therefore, important to note that the substitution of machines for military bodies in Vietnam also resulted in the male American body ceasing to have meaning as whole; becoming, instead, a fragmented collection of disconnected “biceps, triceps and tattoos,” of disarticulated bits of information that achieve the illusion of coherence only through their display as masculine spectacle and signification (*DP* 150). This is notable because who these men were, or who they thought they may be, relied very closely on this illusory paradigm of bodily wholeness - which, Herr argues, had precedent only in film and myth, and so was never real. By disrupting the continuance of this spectacle that gave military existence meaning and dignity and uncovering the fatal fallacy of it, Herr’s concern for the myriad ways bodies can fall apart consequently testifies to what Elaine Scarry regards as “the incontestable reality of the body,” a reality which is made “compelling and vivid” through wounding (62). Taking for “its own interior content the interior content of the human body” (Scarry 62), the corporeal bloodiness of Herr’s representation of the Vietnam War, in other words, serves as a marker of realism; one which strips away the archetypal surface meanings by which men defined their selves to reveal the dangerous duplicity of the masculine social and symbolic orders.

It is through his rendition of the male body as “mottled and twisted like [it] had [its] skin on inside out” (*DP* 19) that Herr in fact embraces what we “permanently thrust aside in order to live,” that which deconstructive feminist Julia Kristeva terms, ‘the abject’ (3). Neither subject nor object, Kristeva defines the abject within a “discourse of the body” (54), as that which we might call a “border,” both ambivalently “inside and outside the body” (4). It is a metaphoric exuberance that disturbs identity, system and order, “disrupting the social boundaries demanded by the symbolic” (Kristeva 4); which have been naturalised, here, by a coercive fiction of the male body as enveloped in a full “hot stinking metal” jacket of armour (*DP* 30). In exposing the gross materiality of “their mutilated bodies” (103), Herr thus destabilises this “defensive armouring [that] ends in total paralysis” (Foster 79) –

specifically, death - and opens up the marine's abject body as a masculine "space of becoming," that is, as "a site for destruction, dismemberment" and, moreover, "renegotiation" (Kristeva 6). Since the soldier usually "died before he could tell us what happened" (*DP* 7), the grotesque obscenities inflicted on the warring male body as graphically depicted by Herr serve to tangibly tell the story that "wasn't being told" for these men (209), by literally "[penetrating] that first innocence" principal to the manner in which civilian America appreciates war and defines masculinity in relation to it (21). Indeed, through utilising the material fact of the multitudes of damaged and opened male bodies, Herr in effect forges the gap between 'real' experience and representation to show us those things we "don't know" about men and war, and "won't know" as long as history refuses to tell them (140).

In imparting, "the body in pain, the body maimed, the body dead and hard to dispose of" (Scarry 62), Herr does more than seek to deconstruct the perceived phallocentrism of the symbolic, but furthermore endeavours to reconstruct the male subject and the real by recovering the self and his experience through palpable fragments. To analyse *Dispatches* from this point of view it becomes necessary to focus on how Herr orders the book through the mode of memory, juxtaposing corporal disintegration with a series of disorientating literary fragments representative of his mind's searching for a true comprehension already undergone but not properly assimilated or ordered. In his originally experiencing consciousness, Herr is, we know, unable to interpret the violent suffering and death he sees other than as an image derived from celluloid. Reporting his reaction to "a dark spot," which spread across a marine until "it was running in slow, heavy drops off of his fingertips," Herr exclaims with ironic contention that, "he was dead, but not (I knew) *really* dead" (169; emphasis added). The cultural politics of this is important because, while authoritarian masculinity has traditionally always been wedded to the immediacy of experience exemplified through violence, Herr's retrospective assertion, "I'd seen it, known it and passed it over, *but not really*," infers that pure perception can only ever be achieved after the experience, through the intense probing and deliberation of a consciousness resolved to use

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memory to re-explore it (208; emphasis added). Herr begins the book with this long section entitled 'Breathing In,' comprised of segments written from a perspective well after his stay in Vietnam. He notably goes on, however, to conclude the text by 'Breathing Out.' It is in this final part that he expressly details his return to the US, wherein he realises he has only "performed half an act" (254) in Vietnam, and, "like everyone else who had been through a war," his views have "changed, enlarged," but are very much still "incomplete" (244). By structuring the book in this way, Herr implies that only when the distancing of time allows him to study and shape experience through memory and art, can he truly complete the act of "going to that place" known as Vietnam (254).

It is here, "back in the world," that Herr concerns himself with one of the abiding adaptations in critical thought known as trauma theory (244). Whereas the initial meaning of the word 'trauma,' from the original Greek, was 'wound,' which refers to physical injury and not mental scars, trauma theory takes psychoanalytical approaches to the subject and experience, as well as history and memory. It is telling that Herr should then use America as a site for examining "psychic wounds" (56), since 'home' is not merely a physical location, but also, Robin Wood suggests, "both a state of mind and ideological construct" (228). To return "back home" to America should therefore entail a restoring of faith in the fundamental mythic elements of national identity and manhood (*DP* 6). Yet in *Dispatches*, most of the Marines "can't hack it" (6), because "once your body was safe your problems weren't exactly over" (62). One veteran soldier tells Herr how he would "stick a hunting rifle out the window, leading people and cars as they passed his house, until the only feeling he was aware of was all up in the tip of that one finger" (6). One such other "crazy fucking grunt" known as Orrin declares that, "there's gone be a death in my family, [...] soon's I git home," and whenever Herr remembered him, "all [he] could think of was that there was going to be a shooting in Tennessee" (127). Rather than merely bringing the brutality of Vietnam back home to America, the conduct of these men - who would "get through the war [just] so [they] could go home and kill" (127) - epitomise the outmoded and unnatural violence for which American masculine mythology is the original home-base, and which is thus beyond

the realm of intentional action. Cathy Caruth has described how, “in addition to the psychological contributions of trauma, bodily components store and perpetuate traumatic events and sensations” in a responsive loop (61). For Caruth, what causes trauma, then, “is a shock that appears to work very much like a bodily threat,” and what is “passed on,” is “not just the meaning of the words,” but “their performance” (Caruth 111). It follows that trauma occurs for these men when the very powers they trusted to protect them in war “twist and turn back on you” (46), like “old acid backing up, residual psychotic reaction” (255); that is to say, when the American soldier begins to suspect that the masculine mythos promising to give him security had, from the very start, “lied to [him],” and yet he continues to restore the pretence nonetheless (176).

The “historical power” of trauma is, of course, “not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting,” but that it is only “in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all” (Caruth 6). It is, thus, not just the violent intensity of the experience of war that makes the marine re-live it time and time again, but rather the contained and camouflaged contingency of the social order, which results in these emotionally incapacitated men’s failure to allocate meaning to what really happened in Vietnam, and why. As Jenny Edkins explains, in order to truly “experience something,” we need some idea of “what is actually happening” (39). However, when an event is traumatic—as in the intolerable and unprecedented circumstances of war - “we don’t have this,” and hence we are “not able, even in a preliminary way, to say what happened” (Edkins 39). Trauma is, therefore, not experience as such – as an experience – when it takes place. It is, instead, that which stays “stored there in your eyes” (*DP* 181), returning in the abiding form of “vivid and unremitting” dreams (33). Herr recounts how:

During my first month back I woke up one night and knew that my living room was full of dead Marines. It actually happened three or four times, after a dream I was having those nights (the kind of dream one never had in Vietnam), and that first time it wasn’t just some holding dread left by the dream, I knew they were there [...] [and] that I’d have to go out soon and cover them (245).

The fact that “they didn’t remember their dreams [...] when they were in the zone,” but only after - at a time when the “dreaming would be constant, open, violent and clear [...] like hearing a language for the first time and somehow understanding every word” (*DP* 32) - denotes the way in which events do not become traumatic until they are “retrospectively imbued with meaning” (Edkins 32). Indeed, while this scene visually recalls the one Herr described earlier in the text, in which “a chopper full of dead men” had been “wrapped around in ponchos,” the event only proceeds to psychologically perturb him much later on, in the realm of his current custom life (*DP* 17). To this end, Maurice Halbwachs posits that one’s experience will leave a lasting memory “only to the extent that one has thought it over,” that is, to the extent to which it is “connected with thoughts that come to us from the social milieu” (53). Caruth similarly identifies trauma as “the confrontation with an event that, in its unexpectedness and horror, cannot be placed within the schemes of prior knowledge” (153). Given that he “went to cover the war” only to find that “the war covered him,” consequently implies that “the information isn’t frozen, you are,” and while Herr may use this ‘new’ self-reflexive medium of new journalism so as to retrospectively make sense of what ‘really’ happened in Vietnam, his privileged position of perception is moreover still governed at the level of a founding capitalistic, imperialistic narrative fiction of mythic masculinity, which always grotesquely culminates in the violence of war.

In this respect, *Dispatches* is much more than a specific comment on a particular war, but an emblem for the presentation of dominant cultural ideology in contemporary American society. This is articulated in the closing lines of the text, in which, “coded like a prayer,” Herr repeats: “Vietnam Vietnam Vietnam, we’ve all been there” (262). In iterating the name as a “code” we are all familiar with, Vietnam emerges over and above being just a country or a war. Markedly, it transpires as a moral currency, by means of which Americans living through the Vietnam experience in the 1960s and ‘70s may renegotiate their relation to the event on their own domestic, debtor terms. It is at the level of this exposure of a larger narrative “secret history” (220) that Herr’s book, in truth, addresses a very serious

nationalised dilemma, namely, the despair of not being able, or willing, to comprehend external reality and history beyond the previously formulated structures supplied by one's culture, "until the day years later when there were none of us left there" (70).

With his death in June 2016, it is, therefore, especially significant to appreciate how Michael Herr's intensely self-conscious new journalistic form respectively opened up the place for a whole new reflexivity, one that could communicate not only the journalistic facts of war, but also explore one's physical, emotional and psychological experience of them too. His literary legacy is certainly evident with the prominence of late twentieth-century semi-autobiographical Vietnam writers such as Tim O'Brien, as well as twenty-first century novelists of the Iraq War like Kevin Powers; who, in the 2015 Picador Classic edition of *Dispatches*, revered Herr's text as, "a rare and precious gift" that offers those "stories worthy of being told until stories like this don't happen anymore" (Powers xii). Similarly esteemed by John le Carré as being, "the best book I have ever read of men and war in our time," *Dispatches* no doubt then stands as a leading critique on the grave intimacy of gender and war, taking for its principal subjects the decline of that previous "Men Without Women trip" narrative paradigm – which, in reality, "got old all the time" – together with the breakdown of any shared state language through which a veteran might convey such experience (*DP* 228). Herr does this, of course, so as to "take the glamour out of war," but as the resurging chest-thumping, flag-pumping, Rambo bravado patriotism of the Reagan eighties would soon show, "how the bloody hell can you do that?" (248).

Conclusion

“THIS IS NOT AN EXIT”

American Masculinity Since 1977

In the opening pages of *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man*, journalist and author Susan Faludi repackages a venerable narrative about the feminisation of American culture in the 1990s, arguing that the ‘crisis’ of manhood in late twentieth-century America stemmed from the fact that men had become “consumers instead of producers,” that is, “passive reflectors of consumer culture rather than active participants in it” (38). Similarly writing in the nineties, albeit from a perspective of masculinist rather than feminist prerogatives, mythopoetic male activist Robert Bly advocated the need for men to “get in touch with their primal instincts for competition and violence” (64-5), and to reclaim the “spiritual core of maleness” that had long been buried beneath the feminised dictates of commoditised capitalism (4). As previous chapters have shown, the representation of masculinity through the prism of an emasculating late capitalist commodity culture, together with the homosocial backlash of “Angry White Male” politics (Faludi 40), became increasingly popular and increasingly foregrounded in literature as early as the late sixties and seventies, from James Dickey’s “river-mystique” (45) to Michael Herr’s soldierly “John Wayne wet-dream” (19). Given the continuing relevance of this conceptual framework in succeeding decades, however it is important to appreciate the extent to which such popularity marks more than an acceptance of the fact men were in supposed crisis during the 1970s, which would diminutively equate the opening and closing of the decade with the respective overture and closure of ‘masculinity’ and its ‘crisis.’

Indeed, if this study assigns an ending date of 1977, it begs the question of how masculinity has been represented in the years since then. As we know, authors of masculinity in the seventies frequently rebuked the capitalist processes underpinning normative patriarchal discourse, and in so doing began to lay bare a variety of systemically violent contradictions underlying traditional, essentialist and imperialist forms of American

masculinity. Importantly, however, their fiction also often dramatizes the myriad ways male protagonists were less interested in the pursuit of progress for gender equality at this historical moment of the civil rights movement, than in the continuing corroboration of a mythical masculinist principle. Thus, rather than simply defining and advancing the altered gender relations of that specific period, the contemporaneous opening up of these demythologising contradictions in the 1970s provided the means for conducting an exploratory investigation into the nostalgic ratification and reiteration of established beliefs and habitual associations surrounding American manhood in the following decades; which, of course, witnessed the unnerving liberal feminism of the seventies principally give way to an amplified hypermasculinity presenting itself at the beginning of the Reagan era. Concurrent works such as Russell Banks' *Affliction* (1989) distinctly addresses the eighties as "a time of emotional stress or conflict" (215), wherein the "false self-image" of American masculinity was being "cruelly brought to an end" (102). It is through the tale of Wade Whitehouse, a small-town "sonofabitch" policeman in New Hampshire – a man estranged from his wife, dissociated from his abusive father, and who would turn "really mean when he wanted to" (22) - that Banks significantly situates this "crisis" alongside a fateful legacy or "tradition of male violence" (46). The novel becomes, as such, an emblem for "all those solitary dumb angry men" in America, who had "once been boys with intelligent eyes," but whose "dark hateful feelings [...] kept getting in [the] way," transforming them into "embittered brutes [...] afflicted with [...] man's anger" (AF 46).

With "no interior space for him to retreat to," Wade's "bearish swing of his arm" – which he believes would "sweep all [...] his rage and his fear and his feelings of pure distress [...] away" (AF 46) – corroborates Bly's raw reclamation of the 'wild man' whom the purportedly effeminising culture of late capitalism had "locked away" (Bly 58). The fact this masculine 'redemption' transpires in the form of domestic violence against Wade's daughter, however, echoes the displaced abjection inflicted upon Pecola by Toni Morrison's Cholly Breedlove - namely, that "inevitable expression of [...] rage that fills men when they feel weak or lost" (AF 95) - and further iterates the psychic fault lines of a deterministically

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violent, patriarchal masculinity. Because Reagan and his supply-side economics sanctified a revolutionary return to “cowboy economics” – which, according to Richard Slotkin, “projected models of heroic behaviour [to] reinforce the values of ideology, and affirm [...] the distribution of authority as power that ideology rationalises” (1973 18) – the symbolic standardisation of an ideology of male violence in the 1980s logically motivated many writers concerned with masculinity at that time. Whether it was Cormac McCarthy’s “murderous, bloodstained [...] residue of nameless rage” in *Blood Meridian* (1985 153), Banks’ “deliberately toughed and coarse cultivating [of] violence” in *Affliction* (1989 300), or else Dennis Cooper’s “interest in sexual death” in *Frisk* (1991 40), the normalisation of belligerent brutality as a necessary, defensive, and reactive identity formation for the contemporary American male has been employed throughout the literature of the eighties and nineties. It is at its most extreme, however, that this meant what had, in 1973, been a vulnerable and hopeless hysteria encapsulated by McCarthy’s “child of God much like yourself perhaps” (6), was, in 1991, reimagined as the vacuous vanity and savage symbolisation of an anthropomorphised American psycho.

Set amid the unscrupulous commodity culture of Reagan’s eighties, Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho* (1991) is founded on what Andrew Dix, Brian Jarvis and Paul Jenner describe as “an audacious and alarming analogy between conspicuous consumption and serial murder” (37). Unlike the disenfranchised Lester Ballard, whose murderous necrophilia denotes a marginalised masculinity based on material contingency, Ellis’s young urban professional protagonist, Patrick Bateman, epitomises the violent infrastructure of an affluent eighties Wall Street society. His sadistic behaviour in the latter half of the novel can therefore be tied to his privileged position in a world where “commodities, places and subjects” have eventually evaporated into “signs, images and fantasies,” and in which the American male is driven libidinally and aggressively by illusions from a “collective phantasmagoria” that cannot be “finally fulfilled” and so must be “compulsively repeated” (Dix et al. 46). In a state of voluntary servitude analogous to John Cheever’s early “ass-kisser

[...] brown-nosing goody-goody” portrayal of Eliot Nailles (*AP* 372), Bateman’s compulsion to just “...fit...in...” presages a desperate desire to find self worth not only in what he possesses, but, moreover, in his possession of designer brands (228). When descending “downtown toward Wall Street,” he notably repeats on successive pages, “the shoes I’m wearing are crocodile loafers by A. Testoni” (28-29). This apparent consumer agency, while it may possess things, is itself in thrall to those things as well. Needs are likewise directed not so much towards objects as towards values, and Bateman’s satisfaction significantly relies on his sense of signing up to those designer values that have been imposed upon him by particular social interests; interests which determine something “cheap” to be something “bad,” and “bad because it’s cheap” (20). Internally subject to the external “pleasures of conformity and the importance of trends” (343), Bateman is, thus, fundamentally devoid of any self-defined or autonomous subjectivity, and is, instead, ironically dependent upon the successive consumer logic of desire of free-market ideology, with his social existence itself guided by what Karl Marx deems the “hysteria of conversion” proper to capitalism (77).

To this end, Elana Gomel identifies Ellis’s text as a “postmodern novel of manners,” through which the author traces the “disintegration of the cultural paradigm of depth and secrecy and the emergence of a new paradigm of surface and spectacle” (Gomel 50). Certainly, throughout the novel, the incessant recital of the cultural codes of clothes – from “Dolce & Gabbana,” to “Yves Saint Laurent,” to “Calvin Klein” (*AP* 20) - provides Bateman with a preordained source of identification that is structured from the outside; one which, “almost by rote” (108), verifies his ability to conspicuously consume expensive products that corporate advertising deems ‘desirable,’ and serves to then shift his consciousness away from the essential vacuum that yawns beneath the “winged lapels” of his “Valentino jacket” (50). Bateman’s social reality becomes, in turn, a structured network of commodity exchange guided by a fetishistic illusion, and this is further emphasised when he decides “to even up the score a little by showing everyone [his] new business card” (42). Pulling out his “gazelleskin wallet (Barney’s \$850)” and slapping his “new card” made of “bone” on the table, Bateman’s misrecognition that the “elegance of color” and “tasteful thickness” are in

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fact immediate phallic properties of his superior machismo - with him declaring, "I'm smiling proudly [...] waiting for reactions" - underlines the shift from homosocial inter-subjective relations to reified antagonism between 'things' (42). Ellis's characters are successively figured in this way as "interchangeable and characterless" (368), for despite advertising's promise of 'unique' and 'individual' originality, "there are no singular but only serial objects in consumer society" (Dix et al. 41).

With designer apparel and appearances conducted as the compensatory currency of social and epistemological exchange, Bateman is frequently mistaken for his fellow 'yuppie,' Marcus Halberstam, but alleges that, "it doesn't really matter," since "Marcus also has a penchant for Valentino suits and clear prescription glasses" (*AP* 86). This image-centric system of priorities – in which "everyone looks familiar, everyone looks the same" (59) - markedly reduces Bateman and his corporate colleagues to a secular world wherein the traditional notions of the sacred have been colonised by the workings of the homogenous economy. Ellis's male characters consequently undergo a "depersonalisation [...] so deep" they fail to differentiate or recognise themselves beyond the superficial value of their possessions, which effectively accentuates the "purposeful erasure" (271) of the male ego under the impregnable "surface, surface, surface" fortress of corporate capitalism (330). In an extraordinary moment of insight into his own identity, Bateman actually acknowledges how "truly vacant" he is (264); openly exclaiming, "[there] is an idea of Patrick Bateman; some kind of abstraction. But there is no real me: only an entity, something illusory [...] I am simply not there" (362). Whereas Banks' Whitehouse "lived *almost* wholly out there on his skin" (*AF* 215; emphasis added), Ellis's Bateman is *absolutely* "empty and devoid of feeling" (*AP* 266). A self-declared "fucking evil psychopath," Bateman is, in truth, demonstrative of a modern male subjectivity struggling to differentiate between people and things, with everyone and everything he encounters being ever more perceived as collection of consumables that exist exclusively for his expenditure (19).

It is, therefore, important to appreciate the way in which Bateman's hyperbolic object

obsession is not confined to his ostentatious cataloguing of clothes. For Georgina Colby, Bateman's diminution of the female form to an "onanistic object" - typified through his recurrent reference to women as 'hard bodies' - invokes the "reduction of women to commodities" in contemporary America as an "effect of desublimation" (8). In *American Psycho*, interactions between men and women are, sure enough, exchange relations, characterised by features of commodity fetishism. Bateman's ultra savage killing spree against women must be read, then, as more than an attempt to reclaim a powerful phallogocentric order; which, according to Berthold Schoene, demands male "resilience" to what is perceived as the "weakness, subversion, and fragmentation" encapsulated by the feminine (383). Though Bateman articulates an incessant masculine dread that "you can [...] catch anything [...] from pussy" (AP 5), and proceeds to start "mutilating vaginas" - "holding them up in front of [him] like trophies" - it would be reductive to determine Bateman's violence simply in terms of a misogynistic appropriation of the feminine to an object he can control and, likewise, dissociate his male self from (316). Rather, in dividing his female victims into a "multiplicity of parts," Bateman categorically confirms his passive position as consumer by "[increasing] the number of commodities that surround him," and, in turn, his "domination by those objects" (Colby 11). So, what might seem like a patriarchal form of praxis - that is, a subjective working and overcoming of female sexuality made tangible in the corporeal form of three vaginas in Bateman's gym locker, "a blue ribbon from Hermes tied around one of them" (AP 356) - sooner serves to call attention to the inertia of material reality, and the desire - and ultimate failure - to retain the revered object.

Operating as if "gasoline is coursing through [his] veins instead of blood," Patrick Bateman is, in truth, no more than the mere "resemblance of a human being," and his inexplicably visceral violence - rather than delivering a "deeper knowledge" by which men may transgress the isolating influences of late capitalism (362) - retroactively sustains and generates a systemic deepening of advanced capitalism (336). Bateman's personal predicament is, therefore, less to do with an overtly offended masculinity in an America where "all frontiers [...] have been removed" (355), than with a covertly castrating and self-

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defeating masculine mythology; according to which “others are creating your fate” (355), and from which “no new understanding can be extracted” (362). Crucially, Chuck Palahniuk takes this idea further in *Fight Club* (1996), wherein his nameless narrator - generically referred to as just ‘Joe’ - is so defeated by circumstances that he is only able to confront his state of commodified inertia through a violent ‘other’ within himself; namely, his “forceful and independent” alter ego, Tyler Durden (*FC* 174). Amidst the hyper-mediated visual mirage of consumer culture, where “you can’t touch anything and nothing can touch you” (21), Tyler compellingly instructs the narrator: “I want you to hit me as hard as you can” (46). If Tyler is, in reality, however, “a projection, [...] a dissociative personality disorder, [...] a “schizophrenic hallucination,” and if one of the key tenets of the dominant model of masculinity is not only dominance over others but also self-mastery, then Palahniuk paradoxically distorts this, when there is no-one left to dominate except the self in this fractious, schizoid fashion (168). The politics of this is particularly interesting, for the author is implicitly critiquing the way in which American men have, by the mid-nineties, obediently corresponded to hegemonic masculine expectations, and furthermore personifying the essentially self-destructive dogma of an overwhelmingly oppressive patriarchal order that “you don’t understand any of,” but according to which, “you have to fight” (12, 54).

Even while the subsequent creation of a homosocial fight club may seemingly “remind these guys what kind of power they still have” (120) by way of reconnecting them with the primal physicality of their bodies in the face of particular feminising social and economic challenges, Tyler’s development of the club into ‘Project Mayhem’ – an increasingly mechanised militarised cult where “you don’t ask questions,” and which simply replicates the lack of autonomy previously associated with corporate and consumer “tiny single-serving” drones (119, 41) - verifies the extent to which this mythological assertion of a virile masculine sovereignty is always ironically at the servile mercy of a circular and self-defeating patriarchal discourse linked to systemic domination, in particular capitalism. To this end, Palahniuk effectively validates Slavoj Žižek’s contention that, “*in the name of man*

as harmonious being, of a New Man without antagonistic tension, there is no return to a natural balance,” and any contemporaneous “illusion of a possible return to nature,” as we previously saw in Dickey’s *Deliverance*, is but a “direct path to totalitarianism” (Žižek, 1989 5). Before considering this further, however, it is necessary to appreciate the critically castrating, white-collar circumstances from which Palahniuk’s narrator initially seeks to escape, and which ultimately provide the premise for Tyler’s arrival, together with his primal programme to reinstate ‘manliness’ in the civilised world.

Like Ellis, Palahniuk presents consumerism as the ideological impetus and existential experience that softens and subjugates men. Denied access to his primary role as producer, Palahniuk’s nameless “recall campaign coordinator in a shirt and tie” (49) epitomises a generation of domesticated corporate men condemned to work “jobs they hate, just so they can buy what they don’t really need” (149). Karen Ashcraft characterises this form of “white-collar masculinity,” positioned within a precipitously expanding capitalist economy that promotes “narrowly defined notions of instrumental reason and material comfort,” as being “highly susceptible to feminisation,” given the erosion of individualism and the establishment of a conforming and standardising atmosphere (6). Indeed, a “slave to his nesting instinct” (*FC* 43), ‘Joe’s’ feminisation is most effectively conveyed through his intimate relationship with his home:

[A] condominium on the fifteenth floor of a high-rise, a sort of filing cabinet for widows and young professionals. The marketing brochure promised a foot of concrete floor, ceiling, and wall between me and any adjacent stereo or turned-up television. A foot of concrete and air conditioning, you couldn’t open the windows so even with maple flooring and dimmer switches, all seventeen hundred airtight feet would smell like the last meal you cooked or your last trip to the bathroom (41).

Detained within this “filing cabinet,” designed to inhibit rather than enhance communication, ‘Joe’ attempts to furnish an identity from “IKEA furniture [catalogues]” (41). He claims that “every stick of furniture, [...] the lamps the chairs, the rugs were me” (111), and

consequently undergoes what Elizabeth Grosz describes as a complete “depersonalisation by assimilation into space” (122). The level of existential stability ‘Joe’ attains from purchasing “the right set of dishes” and the “perfect bed” (*FC* 44), in this way, incites the formation of a “syncretic unity” that dissolves the corporeal distinction between the masculine ‘subject’ and the consumer ‘object’ (Grosz 122). This primary incorporation of the individual “into his environment,” of course, highlights how cultural and economic practices are “physically and materially embodied, personified, and reproduced” in market culture, and “at the cost of any identity” (Grosz 133). With his “tiny life” then circumscribed by “Swedish furniture,” ‘Joe’ becomes increasingly indistinguishable from, and imprisoned by, the reified commercial values of a commoditised culture, and “the things [he] used to own, now they own [him]” (43-4).

It is, nevertheless, important to realise that ‘Joe’s’ feminisation does not stem from this familiarity with his home, but such intimacy is rather the result of his sense of emasculation experienced in the industrial sphere; a domain traditionally associated with maleness. As Andrew Hock Soon Ng argues, ‘Joe’ projects “a feeling of dissatisfaction with his public self onto a personal space,” and in doing so affiliates his understanding of himself with the domestic sphere; a sphere conventionally understood as the “location of female work, consumption and identity” (Ng 125). With this in mind, it is interesting that ‘Joe’ - in an attempt to cure his consumer-induced insomnia - should attend a support group for men with testicular cancer, which figuratively reinforces the castrating potency of consumerist fixation. It is here that he meets Robert ‘Bob’ Paulson, a former body-builder who lost his testicles to cancer caused by “shooting too much testosterone” (*FC* 21). Bob in many ways typifies the “injection moulded” excessive male body rendered monstrous through processes of feminisation (61). It is through his efforts “to look like a man [...] the way a sculptor or an art director says” (50), that Bob, in truth, exhibits the postmodern desire for an ‘image’ of manliness as opposed to the return to an ‘authentic’ masculinity, and highlights the extent to which the American male body, since the hypermasculine 1980s, has been re-approached

first to meet capitalist objectives. The fact that Bob develops “bitch tits” because “his testosterone ration [was] too high,” which meant his body needed to “[up] the estrogen to seek a balance” (17), points up the paradox of his masculine performance, and ultimately underscores that anxiety to which the concurrent process of masculinist assertion and denial was designed to deflect. To this end, Bob is comparable to Lewis Medlock of *Deliverance*, for both men expose the supposed return to masculinity through an assertion of the male body as a futile and fundamentally doomed attempt to reinscribe the corporeal and real into the symbolic, which cannot help but occur as ornamental object in the consumer age.

Reduced to a weeping maternal figure - “cradling” the narrator between “his sweating tits” because he thinks ‘Joe’s “testicles were removed too” (17) - Bob epitomises the disintegration of patriarchal norms into a culture that relies upon ‘feminine’ qualities of support and empathy over ‘masculine’ attributes of strength and virility to “bring men together” (23). This is significantly reinforced by Marla Singer, whose penetrating presence acts as testimony to the feminised space of the therapeutic groups. Her female assimilation shames and impedes the possibility for male intimacy, with ‘Joe’ explaining, “I can’t cry with this woman watching” (22). Lacking any form of phallus other than a “soft pink plastic [...] dildo,” Marla’s female “tourism” in effect undermines any cultural authenticity, while furthermore accentuating the symbolic castration of an entire generation of men (61). For Henry Giroux, this intrusion by Marla personifies the basis of a consumer mediated “world of mirrors” that destroys reality (2000 32). The beleaguered narrator is, hence, unable to escape this world of “insubstantial mirrors” (Giroux, 2000 34) because “Marla’s lie reflects [his] lie” and all [he] can see are lies” (*FC* 23). Their equally fraudulent participation in such twelve-step tourism, in this manner, inclusively indicates a contemporary American culture of inauthenticity; one that is taken to its extreme limits by Marla’s feminine incursion in a testicular cancer group, which ultimately renders gender ineffective in this therapeutic culture as it is reduced to a tautology that fails to elucidate experience or reverse the effects of feminisation.

Notably, Tyler actively enters the narrative immediately after Marla, thereby personifying a physical response to a symbolic castration. His ensuing emergence erects a strong, proud masculine presence amongst a disenfranchised “generation of men raised by women,” and drives to deflect the impotence of a modern ‘feminised’ society (50). According to Tyler, American men have been disenchanted by commodity culture, “raised by television to believe that someday we’ll be millionaires and movie stars and rock stars, but we won’t” (166). By defining the violent hypocrisy of late capitalism almost exclusively in terms of an attack on traditional notions of manhood, Tyler subsequently reinscribes masculinity within a “dominant logic of stylized brutality” predicated upon a need to “denigrate all that is feminine” (Giroux, 2000 32). Thus, in contrast to Patrick Bateman’s regimental preoccupation with exteriority - which left him “feeling shit but looking great” (*AP* 103) - Tyler refutes the “bronzed and defined” (*AP* 22), or else “pumped and shaved” (*FC* 50), feminised masculinity artificially manufactured and marketed by American commercial interests; declaring that, “even a soufflé looks pumped” (50). Instead, Tyler wishes to take the soft American male, whose “ass is a loaf of white bread,” and to make him hard again, using “self-destruction [as] the answer (49). In order to inaugurate this defeminising process, however, he must first of all eradicate ‘Joe’s’ closest source of weakness – that is, his condominium.

By “breaking [any] attachment to physical [...] possessions,” Tyler fosters an abandonment of the ephemeral pleasures of consumption for the concrete reality of physical pain (111). The respective formation of a brutal homosocial fight club - the principal priority of which is “getting hurt” (51) – followed by the “organised chaos” of Project Mayhem – in the aftermath of which Tyler promises his “space monkeys” they will “hunt elk through the damp canyon forests around the ruins of the Rockefeller Centre” (116) – in many ways, then, attests the extent to which Palahniuk’s text pays specific homage to Dickey’s *Deliverance*. Reminiscent of Lewis Medlock’s “river mystique” (*DL* 49), Tyler advocates “the kind of life [...] in touch with [...] the purely instinctive” (38), and demarcates a form of manliness that

is prehistorically “carved out of wood” (FC 51). What is more, ‘Joe’s’ desperate petition - “*Deliver* me from Swedish furniture. *Deliver* me from clever art. [...] *Deliver* me, Tyler, from being perfect and complete” (FC 46; emphasis added) – unmistakably reiterates what Ed Gentry earlier experienced as a conflict between the “modern conveniences” of a late capitalist civilisation - which “does not,” nor will it ever, “deliver enough” - and the virile “promise” of authenticity, which “promised other things, another life, *deliverance*” (DL 42, 24; emphasis added). With regards to contemporary American manhood, the central concerns outlined in *Fight Club* thus largely reflect the rhetoric and discursive anxieties of the earlier decades, and in doing so reveal the chronic tensions embedded in this circular and self-defeating performance of patriarchal masculinity. The fact that Project Mayhem aims for nothing less than “the complete and right-away destruction of civilisation” (FC 125), however, dramatizes the cumulative degree to which the proliferation of discourses of masculine crisis in relation to consumerism have reached a critical mass by the late 1990s, thereby necessitating the need for potentially new, and positively antithetical, ways of being human – and hence, of being a man – for the new century.

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Throughout this thesis I have examined a set of literary texts and theoretical ideas intimately related to concepts of masculinity in late twentieth-century America. Central to these conceptions is the idea that, despite the belief that American masculinity qua Adam or John Wayne is a masculinity in flight from the emasculating and conformist demands of post-war society, what these mythological fantasy figures ultimately represent - and, likewise, guarantee - is an insistence on the hegemony of capitalist social organisation and symbolic forms. This systematized fabrication of manliness - which entails the naturalisation both of male inexpressivity and male violence - is, needless to say, remarkably resilient, yet the paradoxical rationale I have interpreted in post-liberationist texts evinces the complexity of this patriarchal masculine ideology, and thus reproves any dominant discourse that works to re-centre mainstream middle-class white masculinity in relation to changing notions of normativity in the 1970s. So even though the “marigolds did not grow” for Claudia and

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Frieda in *The Bluest Eye*, and while it may be “much, much, much too late” for their individual seeds to ever grow, Morrison’s exemplary critique of patriarchy disrupts the frontier soil of America’s imperial underside by cautioning us about the destructiveness of white capitalist codes, whilst furthermore interrupting the reproductive power of traditional masculinity (164). By the late 1990s, we know, therefore, just “where to look” in order to find “bodies buried everywhere” (*FC* 126) - those bodies, that is, concealed behind “some great broken” mythology of American patriarchal heroism (*DL* 185).

While my intention has been to highlight this progressive demythologisation in modern American fiction, it is important to note that “the end of the century and how people, you know, [...] behave” as America crept towards the millennium, is “not an exit” in terms of these complex negotiations of masculinity within contemporary culture (*AP* 384). However, it is my hope that this study has contributed novel insight into the aforementioned texts, and how these specific works not only confirm that masculine identity has undergone profound shifts and transformations from the late sixties onwards, but simultaneously concede tensions and ruptures within those identities – reminding us that ‘manliness’ is contingent and precarious, “devastating [and] versatile,” dutifully resigned to a capitalist domination that will “do everything but stop” (*DP* 70).

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